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Wait For Mrs. Willard

A NOVEL BY
DOROTHY LANGLEY



Simon and Schuster, New York, 1944

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Wait For Mrs. Willard

"I'D LIKE my library card, Charles," said Mrs. Willard. It was not yet seven o'clock in the morning, but she was breathing hard. Her husband, as usual, noticed nothing.

"Certainly, dear," he replied, turning with a gleam of his glasses to remove it from the edge of his bedroom mirror. "When you've taken out the books, you will remember to give it back to me so that I can keep track of the date, won't you?"

Mrs. Willard's expression, in anticipation of argument, was already stubborn. She pushed back her slender shoulders and set her small chin forward. Her face, in repose that of a wistful small girl looking for a friend—an expression somehow intensified by the five solemn freckles on her slightly tilted nose—bore marks of long-continued strain, and even the timidly curling hair about her temples wore its natural brightness with an odd appearance of apology. Her tone, however, was firm.

"I am not going to take out any books today," she said.

"What?" Mr. Willard stared at her, his small black eyes seeming to grow smaller and blacker. "Then what do you want with your card?"

"I want to put it in my purse. Yesterday I wanted books, and I didn't have my card. Last week I wanted books, and I didn't have my card. The week before that ——"

Mr. Willard turned his back on her. "You are quite well aware of my reasons for keeping your card. If you had any sense of responsibility in financial matters ——"

Mrs. Willard breathed harder. "Financial ——"

Her husband lifted a hand for silence. "A library fine to

you is nothing. To me, as to any responsible person, it represents waste. I will not permit waste in my household to satisfy a whim of yours, my dear. I am the head of this house. If you wish books, ask me for the card in the morning, take out the books, and return me the card when you come home in the evening. That is all."

"I won't," said Mrs. Willard.

"Eh?" He turned, his spectacles flashing, to look at her.

"I earn my own money. I pay my library fines if I have any."

This was true. Mrs. Willard was a compiler of indexes. She worked every day in the offices of a publisher who issued semiannually a cumulative bibliography of scientific publications. She was paid thirty dollars every week, and five dollars of this she was always allowed to keep. Her husband, who earned a somewhat larger sum, also limited himself to five dollars weekly. All the rest of their joint income went into what he called their common fund, a term highly irritating to Mrs. Willard, to whom "common" seemed a bizarre adjective to apply to a fund.

"If you won't give me my library card to do as I see with fit," she cried, beginning to stammer a little, "I'll—I mean, to do as I see fit with—I'll tell them it's lost and pay the fee and get a duplicate and ——"

Mr. Willard darkened visibly. "Do you want me to swear at you?" he demanded, for he could be ruthless.

"If you like," she replied recklessly.

"That will be nice for the children to hear, won't it?"

Mrs. Willard made an exasperated gesture; there were times, really, she thought, when Charles had to be heard to be believed. This was, she supposed, what those had meant who once had warned her that Mr. Willard was "of another generation." Mention of the children, nevertheless, was ordinarily enough to quell her. It was not so today. Her mind was made up. "I want my ——"

The hall clock struck seven. Not a moment longer, though ready to bleed and die for principle, could she remain. The publisher's office was an hour's ride away, and Mrs. Willard was expected to punch the time clock at eight.

She was very good at indexing. Lessons learned on the rack, if the pupils survive, are said to be lasting; and Mrs. Willard's mind, originally constructed for registering things like new toadstools in moss and the improbable ears of cocker-spaniel pups, had learned indexing on the rack. It was a durable mind in spite of its deceptive delicacy, and it had survived, though not without trauma. It was a little worn here and there, so that it incurred library fines, lost track of telephone bills, and neglected to remind her to order starch. Mrs. Willard was philosophic about it as a rule, for she understood that even excellent machinery may be expected to show wear after being driven for years by such a driver as Charles.

This was indeed the picture she had of her mind, a machine driven inexorably by her husband. How such a state of things had come about she was not sure. There had been a few dreadful years in which nobody wanted either of their minds, and Charles, who was much older than Mrs. Willard as well as far less elastic, and who prior to the economic cataclysm had been a professor of archeology, took this to be tragic. In fact, for some time it appeared that he had taken it to be final, for he went to bed and remained there seven months. This was a true hibernation, taking place in the bitterest winter known to Chicago, that city of bitter winters, for eleven years, and it was during this period that Mrs. Willard committed her two crimes.

She was inclined to think that the humility which placed her library card at Charles' disposal dated from her first realization of her true character as thief and trickster. Guilty, she had quickly formed the habit of fleeing, and Charles was not the man to miss so obvious an opportunity to get the

reins, as he would have expressed it, into his own capable hands.

Not that Charles had ever known of either of her crimes. Mrs. Willard turned cold at the thought. Strangely enough, the first of these, an actual theft, had not much disturbed her conscience. It was only a thirty-five-cent theft, and she had long ago returned this amount in stamps, wrapped in a sheet of paper labeled, with dogged conventionality, "Conscience money."

It had taken place on the day before Christmas, when she was wearied out with a long day of battering her way through the frantic downtown crowds to make the few piteous purchases that would represent the bounty of Santa Claus to her two fortunately very young children. The boy, Richard, she had successfully provided for. The baby, Laura, had set her heart upon a doll popular that year because of her indelicately lifelike habits and known by the consistently indelicate name of *Petsy Wetsy*.

Petsy Wetsy cost, according to size, from three to fifteen dollars. Mrs. Willard, limited to seventy-five cents, had already made heroic progress toward assembling a passable counterfeit. For fifty cents she had bought a rubber baby somewhat resembling the dewy darling of the season; with a pair of manicure scissors she had performed the slight operation necessary to enable this doll to function acceptably, and with the remaining twenty-five cents she had bought a little knitted sacque of pink wool and a generous length of pink satin ribbon. Diapers were made at home, defiantly out of Charles' handkerchiefs; there was lacking but one detail, an important one. *Petsy Wetsy* lay on a magnificent fluffy pink blanket, and the pink ribbon was intended to tie her there. Mrs. Willard needed a pink doll blanket, and at the end of her day of shopping, exhausted, aching, and rebellious, she came upon an immense pile of them, radiantly pink, in-

effably fluffy, and marked down to thirty-five cents. She looked at them hungrily and turned away. Then suddenly, seized by an unfamiliar but heady impulse, she returned to the table, folded the top blanket to a convenient size, laid it on top of her little heap of parcels and walked out of the store. She made no effort whatever to conceal it.

Her second and darker misdeed, which still dragged at her mind like a weight of heavy metal and brought the brackish taste of metal into her mouth when she recalled it, was also committed by Mrs. Willard in her maternal capacity. Phrases setting forth the ennobling influence of motherhood had since acquired for her an almost leering aspect of cynicism. Her children had delighted, amused, disarmed, and awed her; they had ravished her heart, and she loved them so deeply, so nearly desperately, that she relinquished only with most wistful regret the hope that they had perhaps, according to specifications, also sanctified her. She was forced to conclude that they had not, for concerning the baseness of her second criminal transaction no two opinions could be held.

Christmas had marked the end of the Willards' resources; their savings werè gone, and they were stranded. Mrs. Willard read avidly the Male Help Wanted columns in the daily paper, hoping to discover something that might entice into vigor the reticent energies of her husband, who was still in bed, although he had become active enough to groan and did so constantly. Several times she carried the paper in to him, always timidly, for she was afraid of seeming to reproach him in his misfortune, but although he looked at the item each time he only groaned after doing so, and on the sixth occasion he not only groaned but turned his face to the wall.

Mrs. Willard, with a strange feeling of uncertainty and vertigo, left him and went down to the kitchen. She found the children as she had left them, sitting in their high chairs finishing their supper of oatmeal porridge. The cylindric

pasteboard carton that had contained the cereal lay on the floor, rocking gently to and fro; Richard had knocked it off the table with a flourish of his spoon. She picked it up and set it absent-mindedly on a shelf; then, realizing that it was empty, she dropped it into the wastebasket, sickness gathering at her throat as it left her hand. There would not be many more boxes of oatmeal. Then what of Richard behind the tray of his high chair, industrious spoon upright in sturdy fist? What of Laura with her blue eyes round and expectant over her bib of Turkish toweling embroidered with two blue chickens?

Mrs. Willard moved to the fading light at the window and stared out into the cold and barren twilight with eyes gone brightly primitive. She did not think now of Charles. Her young were at her breast again, squeezing her with soft fingers, tugging at her, their confident eyes on hers, for the life that she alone could give them. She snatched open the daily paper and searched its columns anew. This time it was the Female Help Wanted column that she read.

The beginning of the next week found Mrs. Willard in a training class for saleswomen who were to distribute to the public a one-volume encyclopedia for school children. Ten days after this she was ready to sell. The price of the book was ten dollars. For each copy sold she would receive three dollars in advance, the customer's "down payment." Her still buoyant mind, rebounding joyously from the black moment in her kitchen, found the devious sales talk endlessly diverting and the nods and becks and wreathed smiles advocated by Mr. Stapleton, the sales manager, entrancingly funny. The whole affair seemed to her a cheerful game to be played between the salesperson and the customer, with both sides knowing all the rules and no holds, so to speak, barred; for it was inconceivable to Mrs. Willard that anyone could fail to perceive the absurdity of the premises upon which the sales

talk was based, in spite of the fact that Mr. Stapleton approached the subject with reverence and what amounted to bating of the breath. The tendency of Mrs. Willard to treat the sales talk with levity was to Mr. Stapleton the only source of doubt about her success. In every other way he considered her a find.

"You've got what it takes, Mrs. Willard," he assured her. "I'm expecting big things of you right from the start."

The start appeared to justify his most brilliant expectations. Mrs. Willard set forth on her first day's endeavor feeling as joyous, friendly, energetic, and uninhibited as a healthy puppy. She made three sales and trotted home in the winter dusk entirely unfatigued, the miraculous nine dollars clutched in her hand (not entrusted to her purse) and triumph singing paeans in her heart. Pausing only to shop for dinner, she sped home lightly, effortlessly, to the children and to Charles.

Charles, however, groaned more loudly than ever at this accent set upon his destitution. "So it has come to this," he moaned exhaustedly, "so it has come to this!"

Mrs. Willard could not be instantly dashed from the heights of her elation, but she was a little damped. "Where are the children?" she asked as she took off her coat. "Did you give them their lunch at noon?"

He nodded, wearily. "Asleep," he sighed.

She went into the nursery. Both children lay with flushed faces, deeply asleep. Both had been crying, Richard apparently with violence. They had been fed recently—too recently; there were drops of spilled milk on their rompers, and these were still moist.

Mrs. Willard, no longer elated, covered them lightly and went down to the kitchen, where she prepared a tray of dinner for Charles and afterward ate a little, abstractedly. There was a listening stillness at her heart, the beginning of fear; for Charles, in the first articulate utterance he had

achieved in weeks, had borrowed three dollars of her. Subsequently he arose and dressed and left the house, stirring up in his wife's bosom a storm of hope; but an hour later he returned bringing an imported bath towel of Scotch linen, which he showed to Mrs. Willard before taking off the tag marked "\$3." "I have needed it for a long time," he explained, and returned to bed.

Hope woke within her next day, however, and she made two more sales. With the acid memory of the first night's incident in her mind, she was cunning; she did not again carry the money home but stopped at the grocery and spent it all, together with what remained from her previous sales, for packaged food and tinned milk. This food she hid and hoarded like a squirrel, adding to the store a little nearly every day at first. A little less each day, however; for Mrs. Willard was frightened, and a frightened person cannot sell.

Mr. Stapleton was disturbed. "What's the trouble, Mrs. Willard?"

"I don't know," she replied.

"Little out of sorts, eh? You made a grand start. Mustn't lose confidence, you know; that'll get anybody down. We've got the best little encyclopedia on the market—none better anywhere. Can't do anybody a bigger favor than to sell him one. Yes, by golly, even if he doesn't want it you're still doing him a favor. Remember that." He paused and looked at her keenly. "If I were to guess what's wrong, Mrs. Willard," he suggested, "I'd say you were struggling against some kind of negative influence from outside yourself."

She did not reply.

"Don't you ever pay any attention to anything like that. You know you can sell this book; you've proved it. Keep your eye on that and forget everything else. You'll be all right, Mrs. Willard. You'll be fine." He patted her shoulder kindly.

Thanks so much, Mrs. Willard thought satirically. Yes;

that is what I must do. Keep my eye on that and forget everything else. Forget Charles lying at home in bed, groaning; forget Richard and Laura neglected, needing me, not understanding, hunting for me, helpless, dependent on what little attention Charles can spare them from his absorption in his own despair; forget what it is like to whip my will into action against the steady counterthrust of that despair; forget the closed doors, the rudenesses, the insulting patronages; concentrate, concentrate, concentrate on selling this book, this wonder of the ages, this three-pound compendium of all wisdom. . . .

She gave up on the morning she found herself praying, as she waited in the icy wind outside her first prospective customer's door, that the customer would not be in. This, she knew, was the end of her brief success, a defeat less bitter than numbing; the long agony of gradually lessening confidence had left her no strength for bitterness. But on the next day and the next and the next, and for many days thereafter, she stayed at home. In vain Mr. Stapleton wrote, telephoned, even came to call; in vain he argued, pleaded, swore, and all but wept at this determined defection of the most promising pupil in his latest class. Mrs. Willard would not be moved.

However, she made one more sale—a sale that destroyed at one blow her final chance of a saleswoman's career and her patient hope that in spite of the pink doll blanket she was a person of fundamental integrity. The stored food in the pantry was running low. Mrs. Willard had formed a bleak habit of making a daily definite report of the state of the larder to Charles, who groaned. It had become a dreary routine; at five o'clock in the afternoon Mrs. Willard would appear at his bedroom door and announce that there was only enough food left for six days, or five days, or four days; Charles would groan, and Mrs. Willard would go down to the

kitchen to cook dinner. She did not know what her purpose was in pursuing this course; she no longer really hoped to rouse him. Her mind was like a sailing vessel becalmed for years in some impossible sea and beginning to decay.

There came a day at last when there was no food in the house but a little cereal for the children's luncheon, part of a loaf of stale bread, and a spoonful of tea. Tonight there would be no cereal. Tonight the children would go hungry.

In the afternoon Mrs. Willard put on her coat and hat. "Watch the children," she said to Charles with unaccustomed curttness. "I'm going out."

She took the now loathly prospectus from its shelf and dusted it off. Mr. Stapleton had refused to take it back. "I'm giving you time, Mrs. Willard," he had told her, more in sorrow than in anger, "to come to yourself and get back on the job. You keep that prospectus awhile. You'll use it again. Let me hear from you."

In the back of the prospectus was a list of possible buyers, names gathered for her use by scouts of the company. These she had been accustomed to cross off after each interview. The first name remaining was that of Mrs. Albert Peasley of West Sixty-eighth Street. Mrs. Willard set forth in search of Mrs. Peasley.

The house was a shabby little place with a grocery on the first floor. "Outside stairs," the woman in the grocery directed her. Then, with a shrewd glance at the prospectus, "You ain't goin' to sell no books up there, missus. They got eight kids and he don't work steady."

Mrs. Willard smiled vaguely. "Thank you," she said, and hurried out of the store to the outside stairs. If the Peasleys had eight children, she could hear Mr. Stapleton saying firmly, it was impossible that they needed anything more than they needed the encyclopedia. They might think they did, but they didn't. Future pundits, future statesmen, and she to give

them their start. Oh, thank you, Mr. Stapleton, you are such a comfort! she thought savagely.

She knocked on the door. Mrs. Peasley came at once. She was a thin, clean, anxious-looking woman in the late thirties, with a disarming innocence and courtesy of manner. She had been ironing; the clean folded garments, studded with neat patches, hung here and there about the room. A half-grown girl was winding a clock; she looked interestedly over her shoulder, smiling politely. A twelve-year-old boy, reading in a corner, got to his feet at his mother's admonishing look and set a chair for the visitor. Several smaller children playing on the floor arose and came with eager interest to peer over Mrs. Willard's shoulder at the pictures in the prospectus. They were nice children, intelligent and responsive. Perhaps, Mrs. Willard thought wretchedly, perhaps this time there was truth in what Mr. Stapleton would have said; where else could fine children like these get so much for so little? But ten dollars, Mrs. Willard now knew, is not little, even when there are two children; when there are eight . . .

She shut her thoughts off angrily and began the meretricious sales talk, displaying the wonders of the volume with unscrupulous unction. Mrs. Peasley was as much impressed as anybody could have desired; she exclaimed, she marveled, she praised. There was reservation, however, in her gentle voice.

"My! It's a wonderful book," she sighed. "It would be grand for Albert junior. He's awful good at his books."

"Can we get it, Ma?" Albert junior put in excitedly.

Mrs. Peasley smiled apologetically. "I wish we could, son," she said. "It's a wonderful book, and here Mrs. Willard has been so kind, taking so much time and all. But you know your father can't get regular work ——" She looked pleadingly at Mrs. Willard. "And there's so many of them, you see."

Mrs. Willard hardened her heart. "I know, Mrs. Peasley,"

she murmured sympathetically. "But when a child is as ambitious as Albert—isn't it worth any sacrifice to ——"

Mrs. Peasley flushed painfully. "I'd want to do anything on earth I could for the boy, God knows," she said.

"I'm sure you would. And do you know, Mrs. Peasley, I think our sales manager, Mr. Stapleton, is right. He always says, 'Where else can an ambitious child get so much for so little?' "

Mrs. Peasley twisted her apron. "Yes, that's so; it's a wonderful book." She was silent a moment. "If Ma did get it for you, Albert, it would have to be your birthday present."

Albert's eager expression altered, but only momentarily. "That'd be O.K.," he said.

Mrs. Willard beamed at him with Mr. Stapleton's own brand of approval. "There's a boy who's going to amount to something," she said. Albert swelled with self-approbation.

Mrs. Peasley hesitated. "I wish I could. But ten dollars ——"

"It's only three dollars down, Mrs. Peasley. You can pay the rest in installments."

Mrs. Peasley shook her head. "No; I don't like to buy that way. It's like a drag on me all the time. If I took it, I'd pay for it when it come." She hesitated again, fingering the glossy pages wistfully.

The girl spoke. "Ma, I think we ought to get it. Maybe there's something in it that would help me with my geometry."

"Indeed there is!" Mrs. Willard exclaimed. She turned quickly to the section on mathematics, displaying the impressive diagrams, the clear black printed explanations. Both the girl and her mother examined the page with awe and delight.

"Why, Ma, it makes it just as clear!" the girl cried.

Mrs. Peasley half rose from her chair, glancing toward a

shabby black leather purse that lay on the mantel. Then she sat down again.

"I'd just love to," she said, looking at Mrs. Willard with the beseeching eyes of a child anxious to please. "It's been a real treat, seeing such a wonderful book and having you explain it so kind and all. I know it'd be grand for the children, and maybe I'm doing wrong not to buy it. But I guess I can't. I'm downright afraid to."

Richard and Laura will go hungry tonight. . . .

Mrs. Willard closed the prospectus and stood up. She smiled, but it was a slightly altered smile, and there was an intentional faint condescension now in her tone. "I am sorry, Mrs. Peasley, and I am afraid you may be, someday. Your neighbor downstairs in the store seemed to think that I would find it useless to call on you ——" She paused to note the effect of this. It told. Mrs. Peasley flinched a little; her eyes fell, and she twisted her apron. "But I hoped, with so many children to start decently in life ——" Mrs. Willard picked up her purse and half turned as if to go.

Mrs. Peasley stopped her. "Let me see that geometry page again," she said. She bent above it, trembling with hurt, making a pathetic show of examining it with leisurely dignity. "Albert, bring Ma her purse, please," she said too quickly.

She signed the dotted line with shaking fingers and took out of the purse, one at a time, three worn one-dollar notes. Mrs. Willard could see into the pocketbook; there was a little loose change, but there were no other notes. She made an involuntary half gesture of protest.

Richard and Laura will go hungry tonight. . . .

She clenched her teeth. "I'm sure you'll never regret this investment, Mrs. Peasley," she said. "Albert and all your other children will thank you for it someday."

Mrs. Peasley smiled with some stiffness. Her manner was still courteous but no longer warm. "I don't know what my

husband will say, I'm sure," she replied. "But it's a wonderful book. Good-by."

There was a sort of fury of extravagance in Mrs. Willard's shopping that night. All through her early weeks of earning she had bought frugally and cautiously. Tonight she recklessly bought steak, vegetables, fresh milk, fruit, butter, eggs, sugar, little cakes, jelly; and laden with this booty she went home to feed her family. Grimly she fed them Mrs. Peasley's pride, her peace of mind for many weeks, the hard labor of her clean gnarled hands; implacably she watched them devour Albert junior's birthday present and, one after another, seven additional one-dollar notes drawn out of a shabby purse, slowly, one at a time, with trembling fingers. She herself dined on tea without sugar and three slices of dry toast from the end of a stale loaf of bread.

—2—

SHE committed no further crimes, although a little later she refused honorable employment. Charles' only sister, Laura, was a widow who for years had held the same position, that of personal secretary and companion to a wealthy semi-invalid, also a widow, and who lived in pre-eminent comfort and security on an immense luxurious estate. The increasing invalidism of the mistress of the house had resulted in Laura's eventually assuming complete superintendence; she directed the housekeeping, employed and discharged the domestics, and attended to her regular duties in addition. The cook had recently left, and her vacant position, at twenty dollars a week, Laura now offered (through Charles) to Mrs. Willard.

Mrs. Willard was more amused than indignant, but she expected indignation of Charles, and her astonishment at find-

ing him inclined to look with favor on this project deprived her of speech long enough to enable him to point out a few of its many advantages.

"She says you could have the children with you—that is, you could board them in the village. You would all be perfectly comfortable. It would mean a great deal to me, dear, stricken as I am, to know that you and the children at least were comfortable and secure." He paused, searching her impassive face for some sign of acquiescence. "We should never be ashamed of any honorable work, my dear. And you could give your maiden name. Or," as Mrs. Willard's bosom heaved and her eyes suddenly blazed, "a fictitious name, for that matter."

"My maiden name," said Mrs. Willard in a small tight voice, "was Edith Pearce Armitage. Do you think that's a much better name for a cook than Mrs. Willard? Whose idea was it that I use my maiden name? Yours or Laura's?"

"Laura merely suggested ——"

Mrs. Willard's eyes filled and overflowed with furious tears. All the strain, suspense, and weariness of the long winter, all the humiliations and petty indignities she had suffered as a saleswoman, all that she had endured through Charles' apathy in the face of her struggles, rose in her throat and constricted it, seeming to culminate unbearably in this final insult, this monumental callousness from one of his family. "How dare she! How dare she!" she gasped, sobbing.

Her husband stared at her in blank amazement. "Laura meant no offense. She knew, naturally, that I would not permit my name to be ——"

Mrs. Willard controlled herself and became icy. "I shall never speak to her again. And I shall change the baby's name."

Mr. Willard flashed his glasses at her, severely. "This is hysteria. Get hold of yourself. The child's name is fixed.

She was christened Laura, and Laura is the name she will bear."

"Then God owes her an apology," said Mrs. Willard, her lips white.

"God?"

"He permitted it. It's His church, isn't it?"

At this piece of unexampled childishness Mr. Willard gave her an expressive glance and left the room. His sister's letter had caused him to leave his bed, for he knew that the supine position is ineffective for one who wishes to take direction of affairs, and he had meant to direct the usually pliable will of his wife toward acceptance of Laura's offer.

Now, however, finding her without reason or sense, he did not return to bed. He felt a sudden distaste for the idea. Spring was rapidly approaching; the little pools of melted snow were gold in the morning light, and he had always been fond of walking in the sunshine. He would go for a long walk, and perhaps on his return Mrs. Willard would have realized that she had made a fool of herself. He was surprised at her. He had never suspected her of snobbishness. And that nonsense about her name. As though a name made a fig's worth of difference, thought Charles impatiently. To be sure he would not have allowed her to use his, but that was another matter altogether, as anybody not a child ought to be able to see. Why had women so little sense?

Mrs. Willard, meanwhile, was wondering whether she had not indeed acted like the fool Charles obviously thought her. Twenty dollars a week and safety for the children—and what did a name matter?

Yet it did matter. It mattered a great deal. It kept on mattering. Nothing changed it. No logic influenced it. Mrs. Willard found herself immovably determined that she would enter domestic service, if and when she entered it, as Willard, not Armitage.

She would not enter domestic service, however, without making one more effort. She would put Charles' pride in her pocket—had he not been more than willing to do the same with hers?—and go to see Lloyd. She would ask him if he could not find work of some sort for Charles.

Lloyd Willard, Charles' cousin, was a prosperous executive in a chain of food markets. Mrs. Willard thought of him in capitals, as the Meat Man. Every time his enormous, expensively upholstered bulk loomed up in front of her the irresponsible half of her mind set diligently to work, while the other half listened with outward respect to his rumbling pronouncements, to mark him off from head to foot in tidy sections, exuberantly labeling these Neck, Shoulder, Brisket, Chine, Loin, Chuck, Rib, Round, Rump, and Shank. Having accomplished this, it sat back and congratulated her briefly; then it returned to mark down beneath the name of each section the principal culinary qualifications of that part. This regrettable segment of Mrs. Willard's brain had, among its other eccentricities, a great liking for completeness, for getting all the ends tucked in, and it had one perennial source of frustration; namely, the fact that there was manifestly no part of the prodigally lipid Lloyd that could be ticketed as suitable for the construction of a good clear consommé. Having reached, as usual, this impasse, it gave up and relaxed into moodiness, and Mrs. Willard was free to listen to her cousin-in-law as anybody else could have done from the beginning.

Lloyd was not encouraging. "My dear girl, Charles doesn't know one damn thing about business or food markets or chain stores. What in tunket could I do with him in my line?"

"I thought perhaps some small clerical job ——"

"Clerical job!" Lloyd barked mirthlessly. "Can he write?"

"I—I think so," faltered Mrs. Willard.

"Figures, I mean, and words. As far as I can make out he doesn't know a damn thing about anything but hyro—heero —"

"Hieroglyphics?"

"Whatever the damn things are. Not a chance, my dear girl, not a chance. Not a damn thing stirring. The only thing I could possibly do with him would be to put him in the headquarters meat market, where the packing employees buy meat for their families, and I couldn't do that because he's too damn high-hat. The first time he sent that cold boiled gaze of his traveling down his nose in the direction of one of those big boys he'd get his face bashed in, and serve him damn well right. Besides, he couldn't do the work without knowing something about cutting."

The insane half of Mrs. Willard's mind, immediately brisk, popped Charles down behind a counter, put a cleaver in his hand, tied a white apron on him, sprinkled him with sawdust, hung over his head a placard lettered EMPLOYEES' MEAT MARKET, CHARLES EDWARD WILLARD, PH.D., DISPENSER, and sat down again, rubbing its hands. Mrs. Willard laughed irrepressibly.

"Now, you," Lloyd continued, looking at her reflectively, "that's different. Sensible girl, I take it. Not afraid of any decent work, I take it."

"Yes. No," said Mrs. Willard.

"Know anything about shorthand?"

"No."

"Could you learn something about it?"

"I suppose so."

"Work yourself up some shorthand and I'll find you a job somewhere here at headquarters. It'll tide you over. Don't worry about looking for anything else right now. Charles was in here yesterday—to see me." He nodded with heavy significance. "Didn't tell you? No, of course not. Hates to

admit a low-brow cousin can come in handy, I reckon. Well, maybe he'll learn—maybe he'll learn. He was always the grand boy for his books, and his folks favored him too much. Spoiled him rotten, in fact. G'by." He shook hands with heavy cordiality.

—3—

THUS passed the Willards' period of near destitution, and so began a period scarcely less troubled, during which Mrs. Willard learned a great deal more than shorthand. She learned, first of all, that her puckish pleasure in subdividing Lloyd was a thing of the past. Not even her irresponsible mind was capable of regarding a man to whom she was indebted with anything but soberness. If she had been able really to like Lloyd it might have been different, but she did not really like him; she only found him a relief after Charles. At the headquarters office she saw a good deal of him. She thought him noisy and arrogant and inexcusably inconsiderate of his workers and more than a little ridiculous, but she could not laugh at him; what she saw engendered only more soberness.

Soberness, indeed, that alien characteristic, became more nearly a habit with Mrs. Willard than she had ever imagined was possible, for in the long hard curriculum of those months there were lessons to try the stanchest. She learned to work all day under heavy pressure and go home to several hours of cooking and housework accompanied with lectures from Charles on the necessity of standing on her dignity even in her present position and allowing nobody to impose upon her. She learned to rise before it was light to prepare the day as well as she could for her family and to control the nausea,

mental and physical, that automatically assailed her at thought of her own day. She learned what it meant to leave her little children, all day and every day, in the care of a man who had no gift for parenthood.

More often than not when she returned at night the eyes of Richard and Laura were dark with bewildered reproach and their round cheeks grimy with tearstains. Too often, as she approached the house, she heard a shriek from one of them or a bellow of fury from Charles, for screaming at them had become a habit with him. She learned what it was to feel red hate surge up behind her eyeballs as Richard, ordered by his father to replace a certain book in a certain exact spot in a large bookcase, could not find the place and begged her in panic terror to help him, whispering frantically: "Mother, Mother, show me where it is, Mother—show me where it is!" Mrs. Willard, lying in the dark that night with Richard's stubby little head pressed tight against her shoulder, writhed on her pillow; what happened when she was not there to show him?

This state of affairs reached a wry climax, tragicomic, as Mrs. Willard's climaxes were likely to be, late in the summer. She heard the children, not one but both, crying wildly as she came up the walk one evening, and she began to run. As she reached the door there came a man's roar of rage and mounting shrieks from the children. Her hand shook so that she could not manage her latchkey. Dropping her purse and newspaper on the porch floor, she seized the key with both hands and at last managed to open the door. At the sound of her entrance the children began crying, "Mother! Mother!"

She flew up the stairs and snatched them into her arms. She could not speak. She could only glare at her husband, whose face was livid with rage.

"Do you know what those damned little fools have done now? I warn you here and now, my dear, that I'll teach them

to keep out of my room if I have to break their damned meddlesome little necks. Look at my bed!"

Mrs. Willard, over the heads of the screaming, clinging children, looked at the bed. The spring was broken, so that the mattress sagged down in a deep hole in the middle. She remained silent, knowing it useless to remind him that in his moments of good humor he permitted and even encouraged them to romp on the beds. She turned her back on him without a word and led the children downstairs.

She had much ado to quiet them this time; they were beside themselves. Richard clung and clung, pressing his fingers into her neck and holding her as if he would never let her go. Laura at last subsided into a pathetically patient attitude with her little hands folded and her lower lip trembling. Mrs. Willard tried to feed them, but they could not eat. Both fell asleep within a few minutes after they had stopped crying.

Later, twisting her handkerchief into a hard ball as she gazed out into the dark and windy night, Mrs. Willard made up her mind. She would leave her husband. She would take the children and go the next day, as soon as he was out of the house. She would go to work as usual, then return home on a plea of illness. Charles would have gone then; he had formed a habit of going for his constitutional—and presumably to look for work—at about nine o'clock every morning. A high-school girl of the neighborhood had been engaged to look after Richard and Laura for three hours each day.

She had no idea where she would go, except that she would leave Chicago. She had no idea what she could do, with two small children and no work. She knew that she might be driven to go on relief. "But I could use my maiden name," she thought viciously. She did not know, even, that she could protect her children from outrage any better in another place than here; well, if not, there was always one way she could

protect them. Mrs. Willard looked despair in the face and, like many another beleaguered heart before her, found it less dreadful than perpetually sinking hope. At least from now on her life should be her own, a clean and separate thing; her children, while she had them, her own.

She arose and left the house next morning with her determination unaltered. At a little after nine o'clock she returned. She dismissed the girl, who was reading to the children in the bay window, and set about her packing. Richard and Laura followed her about, questioning.

"We're going away. Yes, on the train. To Milwaukee, I think. Yes, it's a city. No, Daddy isn't going. Just Mother and the babies."

Richard stopped short, directly in front of her. "Poor Daddy?" he inquired uncertainly.

"Poor Daddy! Po-o-o-r Daddy!" echoed Laura in tones of intense pity, shaking her head.

"Daddy won't know where we are!" Richard pointed out.

"Daddy can't find us!" Laura instantly supported him.

"He'll look all over the house," Richard argued. "He'll look everywhere and everywhere—and in the basement!—and he'll say, 'Where's Mother? Where's the babies?' Poor Daddy!"

Laura supplied the antiphon. "Where's a babies? Poor Daddy!"

Mrs. Willard looked at them in horrified incredulity; no, she thought, it was not possible that real children, children who lived in a house and not in a melodrama, actually talked like this. For a moment she wavered, but at this point Laura overplayed. "*I love my Daddy!*" she cried, elaborately virtuous.

This restored Mrs. Willard to common sense. "I dare say you do; you're looking very much like your Aunt Laura," she retorted crushingly as she snapped the catch of her suitcase.

It was half-past ten; she telephoned for a cab. A few minutes later the doorbell rang. Two men in overalls stood outside.

"This the place where they was a busted bed?" one of them inquired. "Gentleman sent us to pick it up. Baker's repair shop."

"Oh. Oh, yes. Come in. I'll show you." Hurriedly she directed them to Charles' room. Her cab was already at the gate. She called over her shoulder to the men: "Please close the front door as you go out. It'll lock itself."

She picked up her purse and her gloves and handed the two large suitcases to the chauffeur, who now waited at the door. She turned a last hasty glance on the children, who were still murmuring "Poor Daddy" at intervals, and hurried them out of the house. The men followed, carrying the broken bedspring. The cabby, reaching the door of his car, turned to inquire her destination, caught sight of the men and the spring, and broke into a delighted grin, which he controlled with the utmost difficulty. Two half-grown youths sauntering along the sidewalk looked at the interesting cavalcade, the suitcases, the hurrying woman, the bewildered children, the amused cabby, and the broken spring. One of them whistled openly, and the other snickered.

Mrs. Willard, her cheeks scarlet and her head high, entered the cab. The cabby banged the door. The children, with a final glance backward and a final "Poor Daddy!" turned interested eyes on the passing landscape.

"Where'd you say you wanted to go, lady?" the cabby inquired.

"The Sixty-third Street elevated will do," she replied unsteadily.

"Sixty-third," he repeated.

Silence supervened during the few moments of the ride. Mrs. Willard made a supreme effort to control herself. At least the die was cast. At least she was on her way.

But she was not. At the entrance of the Sixty-third Street elevated, glancing over the morning *Tribune*, stood Charles.

Through what followed, not only on that morning but on many days thereafter, Mrs. Willard conducted herself with surprising composure. Indeed, the effect of this dramatic denouement was, in a sense, permanent, for ever thereafter, when stormy impulses assailed her with regard to Charles, Mrs. Willard merely remarked brusquely to herself that she hoped she knew an act of God when she saw one; and this reflection seldom failed to exert a calming, if not a heartening, influence upon her volatile and unreliable temperament. It was years before she made another attempt to leave her husband.

—4—

THE first few of these might be called peaceful years, for Charles in spite of Lloyd's detractions did know a few things besides hieroglyphics. He was an abundant linguist, and after a time he obtained a post as editor-translator, which enabled Mrs. Willard thankfully to return to her children and her domestic duties.

But it was an unorthodox peace, full of unfamiliar undercurrents and discontents as vague as they were disquieting. Mrs. Willard felt that, like Charles' bedspring, she would never be the same again. Time and the repair shop had done what they could, but a certain buoyancy had been lost, and the bedspring had had eventually to be replaced. Prejudice, tradition, and a certain inconvenience preventing the replacement of Mrs. Willard, she continued ostensibly in full service. "Business as usual during alterations," the once effervescent half of her mind offered, feebly; and this being

the best it could do it was small wonder that, undiverted except by the immature rejoicings of Richard and Laura, she knew periods of bewilderment and indecision. Life was not clear to Mrs. Willard.

It was so far from clear, in fact, that for a time she toyed dangerously with the idea of taking to drink. It seemed to her during this period that she was continually being confronted with the more engaging types of inebriate, and a wistfulness akin to envy began to possess her. Riding home on the elevated one evening, she glanced up from her book to meet the wavering but beatific gaze of a white-haired beldame of reeling habit and rich bouquet, who clung blissfully to the leather strap above her head and beamed even more ecstatically as she caught Mrs. Willard's eye.

"Me, oh, my!" crooned this venerable bacchante to Mrs. Willard, in the manner of one imparting a heavenly secret. "I have such a good time! Eighty-one years old tomorrow, and I have *such* a good time!"

Mrs. Willard believed her.

Only a few days later, on her way to market, as she waited for a trolley in the damp midmorning, she was accosted by a jovial young gentleman who came weaving strangely down the street and halted four or five feet away, smiling unsurely but happily. "Hiya, pretty baby," he said.

"Hello," said Mrs. Willard.

"Lost my car," the young man explained joyously. "Had it last night. All gone now. Don't know where in the hell I put it. Well ——"

He lifted his hat with a courtly flourish and replaced it, thoughtfully, not upon his own head but upon that of a waiting milkman's horse. "Good morning to you, and happy New Year!" he concluded.

Mrs. Willard watched him affectionately away.

It was unprofitable, she knew, to while away the hours and

exorcise the ever-present shadow of trouble by dreaming of carefree carousings in the company of these bright spirits and others of their kind. It was even immoral; the mother of Richard and Laura could not, must not carouse. And at the thought of what Charles would say even the muscular imagination of Mrs. Willard boggled. Yet to carouse was exactly, Mrs. Willard felt, what she wanted—to carouse and forget. Because of deep imbibings the ancient woman on the elevated and the young man bereft of his car had alike forgotten their Charleses, if Charleses they had. Could even liquor, Mrs. Willard wondered, do as much for her? She had little hope of it. Even as the question took form she could hear the rasping voice of Charles attacking her: “Have you no dignity? Have you no conscience? Have you no regard for the amenities of the situation?”

The closing phrase caught in Mrs. Willard’s flighty mind. “The amenities of the situation,” she imagined herself replying, waving an empty bottle and speaking dreamily but with tipsy dignity as she steadied herself by a faltering elbow propped against the mantel, “the amenities of the situation seem to me completely uncalled for.”

It was this fantasy, perhaps, that flung her headlong into the arms of the woman’s club; for it is a disturbing experience to find that one has the sort of psyche that is able to become drunken without drink. It is thrilling, but it is not reassuring. Mrs. Willard was unaccustomed to thrills and felt the need of reassurance.

She joined a woman’s club, paid her dues, and went dutifully to every meeting for several months. She found the experience, on the whole, saddening; the women she met there were so deplorably—one could only call it female. Mrs. Willard was apologetic about this epithet. She herself, she would have been the first to admit, was female—“and proud of it,” she thought, remembering Charles—but with the

women in the club it was somehow different; there was an accentuation of femininity, a prettiness hardened in the mold. Their voices and their gestures were caressingly gracious, but the eyes with which they appraised one another were as cold as a cat's. Mrs. Willard could find no response among them to her need, and on the day of the young Irish poet's address she came near giving it up and resigning.

She sat through this address with growing distaste, not for the young Irish poet, whose complacency had aroused in her at first glance a distaste so violent and all-inclusive that its further growth was out of the question, but for the tittering delight of the women in the audience. The young man regaled them with an account of a story he had written at the age of thirteen. It concerned a prostitute with thick legs. She was a very good prostitute; her heart, the speaker said, was of gold; but she suffered great humiliation because of her thick ankles. Finally her lamentations on the subject became a source of irritation to a never-too-patient Providence, and she fell in the street one day and had both legs amputated by a passing vehicle.

The ladies, pleased and stimulated that a personable young man should speak to them of prostitutes, all but annihilated the Irish poet with their adulation during the "social hour" that followed. Mrs. Willard, feeling weary, mentally shook the clubroom's dust off her feet and put on her things to go. Just as she reached the door she saw a stranger, a dark-haired, intelligent-eyed woman seated alone in the back of the room, searching her handbag with a sort of repressed fury.

"She wants a cigarette," Mrs. Willard thought—regretfully, for she herself did not smoke and had no cigarettes. She liked the look of this woman; she would have liked, in her friendly and always hopeful way, to go up and fraternize with her; but, lacking cigarettes, she did not know how.

She made her dejected way home, resolving—dismally enough, for even this would increase the pointlessness of her existence—never to set foot in the clubroom again.

The kismet of Mrs. Willard, however, was not to be so easily foiled. Two weeks later, on the day set for the bi-monthly evening meeting of the club, she was sitting at the bedside of her eight-year-old Laura, patiently awaiting an opportunity to introduce the subject of a tablet of medicated candy she wished the child to take. Both Richard and Laura were in transports of glee because of a witless rhyme that had occurred to one of them—their minds, Mrs. Willard feared, had perhaps been subtly influenced by the inconsequences of her own—and they were both shouting repeatedly, at the tops of their voices, “Gatto the Catto, large and fattoo!” and then collapsing against each other with shrieks of laughter.

Mrs. Willard, from time to time vainly proffering the medicated lozenge to the oblivious Laura, laughed with them. It was the sort of thing she did laugh at, and the children’s frenzy of enjoyment was contagious. “Gatto the Catto, large and fattoo!” she chanted hilariously in unison with them, and offered the lozenge again—or stretched forth her hand to do so, not realizing for a moment that in the excitement she had inadvertently swallowed it herself.

This sent the children into even wilder gales of laughter. “Here, I’ll read you the bedtime story,” Mrs. Willard offered hastily, in some embarrassment, reaching for the evening paper. “Quiet down, now. Once upon a time ——”

“Mother took Laura’s medicine! Mother took Laura’s medicine!” yelled Richard, pointing and gasping, his eyes squeezed shut in sheer ecstasy. “Mother took ——”

“Gatto the Catto, large and fattoo!” roared Laura.

“Sh!” said Mrs. Willard. “Listen. Once upon a time ——”

But this time it was she who, catching sight of an unexpected headline, interrupted the bedtime story. She put the

paper down and rose hurriedly, glancing toward the bedroom clock. "I can't read to you tonight. I forgot it's club night. I have to go to the club."

The children did not mind; they had by no means exhausted their original theme. "Gatto the Catto, large and fatto!" they vociferated together as she left them.

Mrs. Willard went in search of Charles, who was reading in the living room. "Will you look after the children?" she asked. "It's club night, and I've just noticed in the paper that they're having Virginia Teagarden. I'd like to hear her."

Charles lowered his book. "I suppose I must, then. Try to get them quieted down first, please. I cannot understand what attraction there is in these gatherings of women, especially in the evening. If you had consulted me——"

"Please, Charles—I have to hurry." Mrs. Willard sped into her own room and dressed with epic haste. "Children, quiet down!" she called. Cutting off with the closing of the front door a trailer of admonition from Charles about galoshes and a noticeably diminished final repetition of "Gatto the Catto, large and fatto!" from Richard and Laura, she hurried to the car line and was quickly on her way, reaching the clubhouse corner just before time for the program to begin.

She stopped for a moment at the drugstore opposite. Even in her haste she had not forgotten the possibility that the dark-haired woman might be there, still looking for cigarettes. She bought a pack of a popular brand, thrust it quickly into her purse with a guilty thought of Charles, and came at last, panting, into the club auditorium just as the speaker took the platform. She sank breathlessly into the nearest seat, her eyes widening; for Virginia Teagarden, the speaker, whose sonnets had for several years past induced in her that electrification of the flesh and spirit which is the immemorial prerogative of those who love poetry, was none other than the dark-

haired stranger of persistent memory, whose knitted brows as she rummaged in her purse had haunted Mrs. Willard ever since her last visit to the club.

—5—

TO HER audience Mrs. Teagarden was flatly and ruthlessly rude. But Mrs. Willard, who had never quite been able to consider herself a part of this particular audience, was enchanted. The sonnets, tender and poignant as a Schubert love song, had not prepared her for the acid wit, the devastating sarcasms that assailed her from the platform. Beneath them her thirsty mind relaxed and stretched and relaxed again like a strong swimmer. It was like reading an excitingly excellent book, with something more—something very much more, thought Mrs. Willard, groping—added. In a state between laughter and worship she listened, spellbound.

The uneasy audience did not share her pleasure. The ladies were less well disposed toward irony from Mrs. Teagarden, their compatriot and a member of their own sex, than they had often shown themselves under different circumstances. Even Mrs. Willard was momentarily conscious of faint surprise that Mrs. Teagarden, feeling as she evidently did toward her audience, thought it worth while to appear at all. "Perhaps she needs the money," Mrs. Willard thought briefly but sympathetically, "and it makes her furious to have to get it this way."

This, as it turned out, was a remarkably accurate diagnosis. The "social hour" that followed the lecture was shorter than usual, and at the end of it Mrs. Willard, who had lacked courage to approach the speaker and was about to take a reluctant departure, found herself for a moment actually

alone with Mrs. Teagarden in the vestibule—to which the latter, if one were to judge by her hunted expression, had fled in desperation.

She gave Mrs. Willard a quick glance and suddenly smiled. "Hello," she said huskily. "This is the way out of here, isn't it? Come on, let's go get a drink."

She hurried her companion down the street and through the door of the nearest taproom. Flinging herself gratefully into the leather-upholstered comfort of the booth, she cast back her fur neckpiece and drew a long shuddering breath.

"God!" she exclaimed, shutting her eyes. "God's teeth!" she particularized, opening them again. She looked intently at Mrs. Willard. "Got a cigarette?"

Mrs. Willard, beaming, produced and opened the pack she had bought just before the lecture.

"Thanks." Mrs. Teagarden continued to scrutinize her closely. "I know—you were there the day they had that sick-making exhibit from Dublin, weren't you? The one that talked about prostitutes."

"Yes," said Mrs. Willard. "I saw you, too," she added.

"I know you did, bless your little heart. You were being sorry for me. I wondered why at the time. Now I know. You'd heard tonight was coming."

Mrs. Willard laughed. "No, that's not the reason. I didn't know who you were then. If I looked sorry for you, it was only because you couldn't find your cigarettes."

"Oh?" The dark eyebrows lifted. "Smoke?" She returned the pack of cigarettes.

Mrs. Willard blushed crimson. "I—I don't smoke," she stammered.

Mrs. Teagarden met her guilty eyes and smiled. "I'll be damned," she said. She patted Mrs. Willard's hand. "Nize baby. . . . Well? Was I lousy to them? Did I hurt their g.d. feelings, do you suppose?"

"I thought you were marvelous," replied Mrs. Willard.

"A girl has to eat." Mrs. Teagarden reached for one of the highballs that had been brought them and pushed the other toward Mrs. Willard. "I was broke—temporarily—and somebody told me this could be done, curse him. Look at that." She dived into her handbag and threw twenty or thirty folded sheets of manuscript paper, some of them tied with ribbon, on the table. "Maidens."

"Maidens?" repeated Mrs. Willard, puzzled.

"Maidens. Moon, mist, star, snow, frost, flame, ice, dream, and dawn. Will you tell me—" Mrs. Teagarden's voice sank to a note of mellow wistfulness—"why it is that the more one of these well-feathered female songsters runs to club-woman's bosom and cast-iron scallops in her hair the more certain it is that she regards herself, privately, as a mist maiden? These," continued Mrs. Teagarden with passion, indicating the scattered manuscripts, "are poems. They were pressed upon me by your little pals back there, for criticism. Before I spoke, of course. If I could have held 'em off until afterward, four gets you five they'd have left me alone." She riffled the manuscripts in an irritated manner. "I could recite 'em to you without so much as opening them. Thirty or so, aren't there? Twenty-two will be Maidens. Six of the others will be God-and-gaspers, dealing principally with garbage men; and the remaining two will be Strong Stuff." She sighed heavily and put the manuscripts back into her purse. "Well ——"

"Why garbage men?" inquired Mrs. Willard, interested.

"I dunno." Mrs. Teagarden shook her head. "One of these overstuffed drawing-room Muses sees a garbage man, she automatically reaches for her fountain pen and starts giving off something like 'God! Can he not see—or feel—or think?' " She lit another cigarette. "I don't know what makes 'em so sure he can't. You'd think the mere possession of a refuse

cart was enough to decerebrate the proprietor. I don't suppose it ever occurs to them to ask the man who owns one." She tapped Mrs. Willard's glass, which was still almost full. "Drink your milk, baby."

Mrs. Willard drank obediently. "What is Strong Stuff?" she asked.

"The works. What our Irish friend was giving them—and that, by the way, was as outstanding an exhibition of psychological adroitness and good hard common sense as these old eyes have ever looked upon. I'm told he's wowing the women's clubs from coast to coast and will be sitting pretty the rest of his life even if he never writes another line, which God grant. . . . But Strong Stuff, as your little playmates put it out, is generally poetry beginning with the statement that the author thereof is a wanton, baring her breast to every comer. Doubtful, I call it."

Mrs. Willard expressed agreement with this distrust. "A person who was really a wanton, baring her breast to every comer," she pointed out, "wouldn't have time to write poetry about it."

Mrs. Teagarden nodded and extinguished her cigarette. "Something in that. Ah, sincerity, sincerity! Well ——"

They relapsed into a comfortable silence. Mrs. Willard, warmed and stimulated no less by Mrs. Teagarden's companionship than by the unaccustomed highball, was very happy and completely at ease. There was growing between them, so unmistakably as to be almost tangible, the perfection of communion that marks the friendship of two congenial women neither of whom is dowered with that excess of female-mindedness which had formed a barrier between Mrs. Willard and her fellow club members.

Minutes passed. At length Mrs. Teagarden sighed and rose.

"I've got to catch a train," she said regretfully. "I live north. Well, it's nice knowing you, baby." She fastened the

furpiece. "Can I call you sometime? Or write? Will you give me your name and address?"

"I'd love to, Mrs. Teagarden." Mrs. Willard searched her purse for a pencil.

"Mind you write me back, then. And drop this Mrs. Teagarden stuff. My name's Virginia."

The two women clasped hands. "Be seeing you," said Virginia briskly, and was gone.

There followed a lively and exhilarating correspondence, expansive on Virginia's part and quick with delighted response on Mrs. Willard's, and the upshot of it all was that, as the summer heat came on, Virginia wrote urging her to come for a month's visit on the north shore. "I need you here to talk to," she pointed out.

"But the children?" Mrs. Willard protested, by letter.

"How do you mean, but the children?" Virginia replied, also by letter. "Bring them, of course. The beach is big enough for two more; there are plenty of lifeguards, and the sunburn lotion is on the bottom shelf of the medicine cupboard. Less of this 'but the children' stuff. And make it snappy."

Mrs. Willard, trembling, as the durable old phrase has it, between hope and fear, girded herself to approach Charles with regard to the projected visit. This was a matter of no little awkwardness, as she had not anticipated the invitation and had not thought it necessary to mention her acquaintance with Virginia. Charles would not, it went without saying, approve of either Virginia or the visit, but the very pulses of Mrs. Willard were straining toward the change. Go she must, and go she would—"whether Charles likes it or not," she concluded with a flash of spirit.

And go she did, though not without travail. Charles upbraided her at great length for her want of candor in not having told him of her friendship with Virginia; for her un-

wifely lack of consideration in proposing to leave him for a month unattended; and finally—for he liked to get all these things done with as efficiently as possible—for not having sent his gray suit to the cleaner. Upon the introduction of this note of irrelevance Mrs. Willard felt outraged tears sting her eyelids.

“I don’t have much fun,” she said in a small dreary voice.

Charles flashed his spectacles censoriously. “I hope, my dear,” he replied patiently, “that you will someday get over this childishness of yours. You are a grown woman and the mother of growing children, and you talk of ‘having fun’ as though you were no older than Laura. I sometimes fear that your mind is hopelessly and permanently immature.” He flashed the glasses again. “However, if you are so set on it, I suppose you must go. I accept your word, of course, that there is nothing about this woman or her household that would be injurious to the children. Since you have thought fit to exclude me from your confidence, there is nothing else I can do. As for myself, I shall get on well enough, no doubt. I would not have you mar your holiday by worrying about my welfare.”

He paused, to allow this extraordinary benevolence to make its due impression; then, pleased with himself, he patted her shoulder. “I hope you appreciate what an indulgent husband you have,” he told her playfully.

—6—

FROM the moment Mrs. Willard entered Virginia’s house until she left it, her happiness was complete. The children, grown large and independent, played all day on the well-guarded beach. Mrs. Willard and Virginia, surrounded by

peace and beige Persian kittens, slept, ate, argued, played chess, and pondered in an atmosphere of unmarred and easeful harmony. There was nothing to interrupt their enjoyment; Virginia's little maid, a very young girl called Eunice, attended to their casual housekeeping and served them their casual meals.

The blue lake and the white beach lay wide and beautiful just outside the east windows. Mrs. Willard, who had not been outside the sooty interior of Chicago for years, woke every morning to this sight and to the additional ecstasy induced in her susceptible nature by the devotion of Jeeves, Virginia's red cocker, who from the foot of her bed gazed lovingly at her over his frilled tawny paws and his frilled white shirt front. Jeeves slept on Mrs. Willard's bed, frequently sliding off in the night and finding himself, owing to the shortness of his legs, unable to get back on. When this happened he said nothing, but sighed, moved over into the broad band of moonlight from the window, and sat up with his forepaws crossed, praying.

How long he must sometimes have waited in this beseeching attitude before Mrs. Willard missed him she had no idea. But when she woke and found him so she always hastened to set matters right. He rewarded her with what Virginia called an almost doglike devotion; his attachment to her was second only to his allegiance to Virginia herself and his heavy sense of responsibility for the bored or demoniac Persian kittens, toward whom his manner suggested that of a dismayed but still hopeful father with a hypertrophied conscience.

More than once Mrs. Willard shed tears over Jeeves and his incorrigible hopefulness. It was only after years had passed that she realized the self-pitying nature of these tears and knew that what Jeeves had reminded her of—a question that had occupied her for hours at a time—was herself.

These were days of pure gold and too soon spent. They

were not all placid, for at intervals, among her other diversions, Mrs. Willard took stimulating cognizance of a side of life that had hitherto escaped her. No Mr. Teagarden was in evidence, and Virginia's social life was, Mrs. Willard early perceived, highly irregular. During the late afternoon and evening the house was likely to be full of guests, predominantly men, and one among these, of indeterminate surname and invariably addressed merely as Tony, was obviously Virginia's favorite. Mrs. Willard had not been on the premises a week before she felt entirely safe in concluding, if Tony abstracted his brilliant smile and his legato conversation from the shouting, smoking, shuffling, ice-clinking throng for more than a few minutes, that he was making love very privately and too successfully to Virginia.

It was not long before something far more substantial than intuition supported her conclusion. She rose early one morning in the second week of her visit, intending to slip down to the living room for a book she had left there the day before and go back to bed for an hour of comfortable reading. As she returned, book in hand, Virginia's bedroom door opened far enough to permit Virginia's tousled dark head to emerge, and she beckoned frantically to Mrs. Willard.

"Look, Edith," she said, her voice throaty with mingled hilarity and horror, "keep an eye out, will you, and don't let Eunice in here with my breakfast tray. I don't care what you have to do to stop her. Just stop her."

"Why?" inquired Mrs. Willard forthrightly.

Virginia choked, then sneezed. "Because Tony's in here. He's been in here all night. He went to sleep, the damned fool, and so did I. Oh, my God! There she comes now!" The door flew silently shut.

Mrs. Willard, feeling wild, watched the maid swing the dining-room door to behind her and approach the stairs,

carrying a large tray. She put down her book and took an undecided step forward.

The girl smiled at her. "Good morning, Mrs. Willard. This is Mrs. Teagarden's tray, but I can bring yours up right away if you like. Mrs. Teagarden thought you'd sleep late."

Mrs. Willard gulped. "I'll take it in, Eunice. Mrs. Teagarden isn't feeling very well." She forced firmness into her voice. "She asked me to bring it."

Eunice, who adored Virginia, looked hurt. She yielded up the tray much in the manner of an Old Testament mother laying her only child between the jaws of Moloch. "Did you want your own breakfast right away, then, ma'am?" she inquired coldly.

"Oh. No. No, thank you, Eunice; I—I'm not hungry. Just this one." She gripped the tray with panic-stricken fingers, as though afraid it would leap from her hands. "Just Mrs. Teagarden's tray, thank you."

Eunice turned away, astonishment written wide on her face. Mrs. Willard looked despairingly after her; all that long staircase! She could not possibly stand here, holding the tray, until the girl was out of sight. She could not set it down outside Virginia's door until Eunice had got all the way into the kitchen. Even now, halfway down the stairs, Eunice was trying to manage an unobtrusive backward glance. There was nothing for it but—Mrs. Willard set her teeth; knocked distinctly; opened Virginia's door, and went in.

Tony and Virginia, sitting in the middle of the wide tumbled bed, rocked against each other and gasped, tears of repressed laughter streaming down their cheeks. "Oh! Oh!" moaned Virginia in a distracted whisper. "Edith, your face! Tony—Tony—just look at her!"

"Here's your breakfast," said Mrs. Willard indignantly.

"Set it down, angel, set it down. And do sit down yourself, won't you?" Virginia's voice died away again in the last

extremity of amusement. "Oh, poor darling. Edith, pet, I'm sorry. Tony, did you ever see anything so funny? Oh, Edith. Oh, my God, Tony. Here's one to tell your grandchildren, you twentieth-century Casanova. Edith, I'm sorry, I truly am. Oh, Lord!"

Tony reached for a silver-striped cigarette case on the bedside table. "It is a story rather for Mrs. Willard's grandchildren," he observed with his charming smile. "Me, I shall have so many," he added wistfully, "I cannot hope to meet them all."

Mrs. Willard's discomfiture over this episode was brief. She had scarcely left Virginia's room before she discovered that her attitude toward Virginia's behavior was one of complete and unruffled calm. This evidence of moral obliquity she ascribed (not without a modicum of malicious glee) to Charles, that paragon of all the conventional virtues. Virtue without grace is dreary to live with even in times of comparative peace. Grace without virtue, on the other hand, may be enchanting.

Virginia made it enchanting; she was an artist in love. One could not doubt that in her most casual giving Virginia gave much. Warmth, joyousness, and a promise of tender comfort went with her, and she carried a sort of fragrance of love. Mrs. Willard realized, of course, that she was possibly being systematically gulled into thinking of Virginia not in terms of reality but in a series of dramatic vignettes adroitly supplied to her imagination by Virginia herself. She had seen Virginia paint these pictures for others. There was the new man, for instance, Peter Allbritton, whom Tony had brought for cocktails—a tall, gangling, innocent-eyed, easy-going man in tweeds, who, meeting Mrs. Willard first—for Virginia had not yet come downstairs—seated himself on a hassock near her and engaged her in that meaninglessly intimate conversation which appeared to be the universal

language of persons not under the immediate influence of Charles. Mrs. Willard was responding idly, with mild enjoyment, when Virginia swept into the room.

Virginia did not wait for either Tony or Mrs. Willard to introduce Mr. Allbritton. She took in the situation at a glance and moved swiftly to his side, laying a hand at once upon his arm. "But you're ruthless," she half whispered, her intent eyes cleaving his. "My God, what a beating you must have taken from life! What have they done to this boy, Tony? Give me a drink." She took her cocktail from the cynically smiling Tony and returned her gaze to Mr. Allbritton, looking him quite candidly up and down. Mrs. Willard, noting how Mr. Allbritton's ingenuous features took on at once the hard-bitten world-weariness of the seasoned sufferer, laughed inwardly; she had no real interest in Mr. Allbritton, and she liked to watch Virginia work. Mrs. Willard, whatever her shortcomings, had an ungrudging spirit.

Moreover, she loved Virginia deeply. She had an unconquerable passion for peace and gaiety and loving-kindness, and Virginia gave her all three in abundance, together with companionship as opulently satisfying as fruit cake and old wine.

She never forgot the nights, exquisite with the soft lake breeze and haunted by the whisper of the low fire on the hearth, through which she sat curled in the great chair by the lake window, watching Virginia across the room smoking for long intervals of silence, an unfinished highball at her elbow, her dark hair stirring and stirring as though it had separate life, while from time to time she flung out bits of her never-ending, acidly amused commentary on life in general. Mrs. Willard had been until recently too constantly engaged in hand-to-hand struggles with life to approach it in the role of a spectator; but now she became possessed of an earnest desire to determine, in a manner satisfactory to her-

self at least, what it was all about. She confessed as much to Virginia, using the trite phrase without shame.

"It's all about love, darling," Virginia assured her. "Everything's all about love."

"The other day you said it was all about liquor," objected Mrs. Willard.

"Liquor, too, is all about love." Virginia nodded drowsily. "Liquor, and kittens, and religion, and fire opals, and gals like you, and gals like me ——"

"Not like me," interposed Mrs. Willard. "I don't think I'd like love."

Virginia hooted. "You wouldn't, wouldn't you?" She crushed out her cigarette. "My pet, you *are* love. You don't know much about you, do you? One of these days I'll bring you a mirror when you're looking at Richard or Laura. Or Jeeves, for that matter. Or me."

Mrs. Willard was impatient. "You know very well I don't mean that kind of love."

"Now there," Virginia gestured with a fresh cigarette, "there's where you're off, darling. There's where you make your blooming error. Love's love. You can't split it up like that. Either old Pop Freud is right and what you feel for Jeeves is just another variety of what I feel for Tony—" Mrs. Willard, startled, uttered a faint squeak of dismay—"or what I feel for Tony is just another variety of what you feel for Jeeves. I prefer the latter theory; it smells better. But the one thing you should never forget is that it's all of a piece. Figure out the details to suit yourself, but always with that in mind." She leaned back, putting one hand behind her head. "Didn't you, by the way?"

"Didn't I what?"

"Like love. When you were married, I mean."

Mrs. Willard flushed. She had been accustomed to maintain a decent reticence with regard to Charles, but now she

realized that she had already betrayed him. "No," she admitted.

Virginia knitted her brows. "Why don't you leave him?" she inquired mildly at last.

Mrs. Willard lifted questioning eyes. "Why, he behaves pretty well nowadays—for Charles. I did start to leave him once." She recounted the saga of the bedspring. "But now that I can be at home I keep the children out of his way so that he doesn't abuse them, and that was the only reason I was ever going to leave him."

Virginia smoked in silence, regarding her intently. "But look, Edith," she said after a moment, "what about the sex angle?"

Mrs. Willard hesitated. "Well, but he—I mean—that is—his demands are not—are not exorbitant," she said with effort, "and I don't think that's reason enough to leave him; any number of men seem to think that's the main thing they get married for. And," she concluded reasonably, "anybody ought to be able to put up with it once in a while."

Virginia stared at her in amazement, seeming to doubt her seriousness; then she flung back her head and laughed richly and long. Mrs. Willard, after several minutes, was stirred to resentment.

"I don't doubt I'm very funny," she said a little stiffly, "but if you don't mind telling me why ——"

Virginia tossed her cigarette into the fire and crossed the room, still shaking with laughter, to collapse on the broad arm of Mrs. Willard's chair. "Darling," she said. She kissed Mrs. Willard on the nose. "Baby." And she broke once more into an uncontrollable spasm of merriment.

Mrs. Willard, annoyed, went to bed. She remained puzzled and a little indignant, for several hours of wakefulness and cogitation in her bedroom, with her bare toes wriggling discontentedly against the sleepy and sad-eyed but never protest-

ing Jeeves, failed to reveal to her the cause of Virginia's immoderate mirth. Mrs. Willard was of course not unaware that she was, as the saying goes, unhappy with her husband; but she was not at all unhappy without him, and he was out of the house for at least eight hours of the twenty-four, to say nothing of sleeping for another eight. Nobody, reasoned Mrs. Willard, can expect to be happy more than two thirds of the time, for goodness' sake; and with a final exasperated poke of her toes into Jeeves' white collar frill she thumped her pillow resentfully and went to sleep.

Nevertheless she was disturbed. Love, whether one likes it or not, casts a glow. Mrs. Willard on her return to Charles was conscious of a lack never before noticed, and after several days of cogitation she arrived at the conclusion that it was love that was lacking; a thing she had known all along, to be sure, but how different now that she had looked into love's face!

She thought wistfully of Virginia. How exquisite she was, how provocative; did it come, all that, from just having been loved, from just having been close to other people? Little glinting pictures, bright and definite as the squares of prismatic light in a soap bubble, drifted across her mind. Virginia typing, rapidly and viciously, the popular stories that made her living; Virginia typing slowly, with a strange remoteness in her white-skinned, dark-browed face, the occasional starlike sonnet that made her reputation. Virginia lying on the sand in the fringed shadow of willows, regarding her with lazy amusement through the smoke of her cigarette. Virginia bathing a Persian kitten, her fine brows drawn together and her strong tiny wrists arched with determination, and the kitten swathed at last in a towel with only its wet weasel-like head showing and insult blazing from its amber eyes. About whatever Virginia did, in whatever place her light step fell, there was that glow.

Mrs. Willard winced, remembering again the blood-red moon. The picture came through clearly, though she resisted it with all her will.

They lay on the sand, Edith and Virginia, in the growing darkness, listening to the lapping of the water and the clear high voices of the children calling to each other in the distance. Suddenly above the horizon there floated and stood a blood-red bubble, a moon of flame. It came toward them, rising, rising; it throbbed like a thin bellying scarlet sail. She spoke suddenly, Edith, like one in a dream: "Virginia, Virginia, if ever any loveliness comes into my life, I won't turn my back on it. No matter what it is. No matter what it leads to."

"Of course not," Virginia said gently, and waited. But Mrs. Willard did not speak again.

What on earth had she meant? Mrs. Willard, remembering, gave the coffeepot on the breakfast table an impatient push. Virginia must have thought she was crazy. She must have been crazy. It was the cocktails. They had carried cocktails down to the beach.

She set about clearing the table, her mouth trembling. She was burning from head to foot with inexplicable humiliation. A baby, Virginia had called her, and had laughed. But it was not funny to be approaching middle age, a baby. It would not be funny to be an old baby, a chuckling old baby with round empty eyes.

Red moons, indeed! Not again would loveliness come into her life.

Or—might it? She moved restlessly. If only Charles were not so stiff; or if only at the least kindness, the least hint of affection, he were not so instantly, overwhelmingly amorous! With Charles there was no chance for the gentler sort of affectionate interchange; there was in him none of the moving brotherliness one sometimes marked in other men; either

he was precise and pedantic or he was amorous, and from the spectacle of Charles amorous Mrs. Willard had always turned away her eyes.

She wished she had not remembered the red moon. It was too much, this clawing pain on top of the loneliness.

She determined to make one more effort. She would laugh at Charles and love him into laughing back at her.

Her susceptible imagination at once took fire, assuming without question that this project was both feasible and obvious; why had she not made up her mind to it long ago?

She went about her work with a light heart. All day she remained happy, and by night her hopes were riding high. Her thoughts became as incoherent as the raptures of an excited little girl. "It's all my fault. He never really laughs. I ought to have taught him long ago. He's never had a real friend, either, and I have Virginia, dear Virginia, and the children and everything, and I can laugh—we'll find things—I'll tell him ——"

She would have denied it, but she looked the child her friend had called her. Confidence mounted with the hours, and by evening all the planned speeches she had at first arranged were gone from her mind. There was no need to plan speeches. There was no need to manage things. Things would manage themselves if she but gave them a chance.

Charles was late in coming upstairs that night, but Mrs. Willard, happily waiting for him, lay unmindful of anything but her burgeoning plans. When he finally came into the room she stretched out a hand to him.

He smiled perfunctorily. "In a moment." He arranged some scattered toilet articles on her dressing table, then came and sat on the edge of the bed. "I must warn you again, my dear, to see that the children attend faithfully to the few little household tasks I have assigned them. Laura in particular

will not thank you for allowing her to grow up ignorant of the duties that are a part of every woman's responsibility. I don't wish to be unpleasant, but you will drive me to it if you won't co-operate with me."

Mrs. Willard brushed this aside. "Charles," she said softly.

He caught the new tone in her voice. "Eh?"

"Charles." She laid her hand in his. "Charles, do you love me?"

The red crept slowly up into his face, to the temples. It did not disturb her. Of course he was surprised. She had never spoken to him in that tone before. Even to her own ears it was unmistakable.

"Do you love me, Charles?" she persisted.

He made a strangling sound, clearing his throat. "Of course I love you, my dear. But isn't this a—a new development, your taking the initiative, as it were?" He pinched her cheek. "I don't know my modest, retiring little wife! I suspect it's Mrs. Teagarden's influence." Suddenly his expression changed; he poked her slyly in the ribs, his eyes glistening. "So you want to know whether I love you. I'll show you. I'll show you." He pressed her backward against the pillow, kissing her violently.

"No—Charles, no—please wait, Charles ——"

"I'll show you. I'll show you. I'll show you."

A little later he said, "Damn all women. What the hell's the matter now?"

Mrs. Willard was crying helplessly.

And serve her right, she thought the next day. Anyone not a congenital and consummate idiot would have known exactly what, in the role of woman wailing for her demon lover, she might have expected of Charles. But her throat still ached, and tears kept rising and forcing themselves from her eyes; she had been so sure!

DREARINESS, unrelieved and unassuaged, settled now upon Mrs. Willard for a time. Poor she had been, and poor, it seemed, she would remain; poorer now than before, since Virginia had made her want manifest even to herself. The news, announced suddenly one evening by Charles with an air of overweening satisfaction, that his Aunt Gertrude had signified her intention of coming to live with her nephew and his family aroused no interest in Mrs. Willard beyond a slight stirring of inner protest, which she had not the energy to express.

"All right," she said tonelessly.

"All right?" echoed Charles with some asperity. "Of course it is all right. It is more than all right. It is excellent. Aunt Gertrude is a woman of property. She can do much for the children—if you, my dear, will but handle yourself rightly toward her. It is a rare bit of good fortune for us."

Aunt Gertrude, who was a widow named Schnabel, was not personally known to Mrs. Willard. "She has grown children of her own, hasn't she?"

"She has two daughters and a son. But they were, I believe, undutiful. She is not on good terms with them."

This, Mrs. Willard told herself, was to be expected. She felt an inward qualm of distaste for Aunt Gertrude, Aunt Gertrude's property, and Aunt Gertrude's family relations. "Undutiful"—how like Charles that was. How like Charles, indeed, was probably Aunt Gertrude, who was his own mother's sister and who, knowing Charles, still wished to live in the house with him.

However, even the thought of this new incubus could not

stir Mrs. Willard from the apathy of despair that possessed her. She said no more, but prepared the guest room for its new—and permanent—occupant. The children followed her about with questions.

"What's Aunt Gertrude's other name, Mother?"

"What? Oh. Schnabel. Mrs. Schnabel."

Both Richard and Laura burst into peals of laughter. Laura, who, ever since she had been struck by the lightning inspiration that had produced "Gatto the Catto, large and fatto," had been specializing in senseless rhymes, at once began to sing: "Rikki tikki, Mis-suz Schnabel, eats her oatmeal gobble gobble."

"Sh!" said Mrs. Willard aloud. "But she probably does," her inner self protested. She thought of Charles, whose habit of dropping the seeds of small fruits, such as grapes and plums, directly from his mouth into his plate had revolted her for years. To her protests, at first shocked and later desperate, he had merely replied, "Nonsense," and continued to drop them.

Aunt Gertrude arrived about a week later. She was a firmly corseted fat woman with a paradoxically hatchetlike face surmounting a medley of graduated chins. She greeted Charles with warmth, Mrs. Willard with resignation, and the children with open dislike. Her eyes, bright, black, and penetrating, darted like roaches toward the corners of the baseboard in whatever room she entered. Mrs. Willard, a casual housekeeper, told herself with dismal conviction that within three days Aunt Gertrude would be down on her knees digging at these corners with a hairpin and displaying the results to Charles.

This was a too-conservative estimate. Within twenty-four hours Mrs. Schnabel had virtually taken over the house-keeping. She lived from morning to night with a dusting cloth in her hand, and Mrs. Willard and the children were

literally hounded from room to room as she urged them out of the way of her passionate cleansings.

She had brought with her a huge enlarged photograph of her sister, Charles' mother, in a gilt frame eight inches wide; this photograph she and Charles, without consulting Mrs. Willard, at once hung over the piano in the living room. Every time she looked at it Mrs. Willard shuddered uncontrollably, and it was in connection with this picture that she made her only protest—a private protest, by night, to Charles.

"Charles, surely not in the living room?" she pleaded. "She could hang it in her own room—there's plenty of wall space. Or—or"—Mrs. Willard paused to brace herself—"here in our room if you'd like it here. It—it looks so out of place downstairs."

Mr. Willard silenced her with a look. "Put my mother's picture in an inferior room of the house?"

"Inferior?" repeated Mrs. Willard, perplexed. "Why is a bedroom inferior?"

Her husband was angered by her stupidity. "Let us have no more of this foolishness—not to call it insolence, my dear, which it actually is, although I am willing to assume you do not mean it so. I, of course, realize that you, having lost both your parents at an early age, have small conception of the respect that is due a father or a mother. I have often noticed in your relations with the children that you never say or do anything to inculcate this respect, either toward yourself or—which is more important, since I am the head of the family—toward me. Richard and Laura, for instance, seldom come to meet me when I return in the evening. Aunt Gertrude spoke of this the other day, and you may well imagine my humiliation at being forced to tell her that you had not taught them to do so. When I was a growing boy, my mother prepared my brothers and sisters and me every day for my father's return and sent us to the door to greet him."

Mrs. Willard stirred restlessly. "I used to go to meet my grandfather, too," she said. "But nobody sent me."

Charles set this aside as irrelevant. "As for the picture," he continued, "it will remain in its proper place in the living room. Entirely aside from my own feeling in the matter, its removal would offend Aunt Gertrude. And my own feeling is strong. It is my mother's picture. My mother was a woman to be proud of. Her picture represents her, and I am proud of her picture."

Mrs. Willard was too thoroughly stunned by this final pronouncement to carry the argument further. Proud? Proud of that picture? Fond, perhaps, the perverse attitudes of the (masculine) filial mind being what they are; but proud? No, surely not proud; for the woman in the picture was Aunt Gertrude's twin for meagerness of spirit, petty pride, and chins; and not by the utmost effort of the mind could Mrs. Willard imagine even Charles being proud of the lineaments that so mercilessly reported what must have lain behind the solidly stayed bosom and beneath the flattened loops of hair.

Needless to say, however, the picture remained in place above the piano, and Mrs. Willard who had a modest talent for this instrument and had found it a considerable comfort when comfort of any kind was scarce, lost even that consolation; for, confronted with the photograph and paralyzed by the assault upon her senses of the gilded atrocity of the frame, she was quite unable to produce anything that would pass for music. To be sure, she had been playing less and less of late anyway, for every time she felt like approaching the piano she saw that Aunt Gertrude had just cleaned it again, keys and all. Her sitting down before it would therefore be followed by glances of stabbing disapproval, and her arising from the bench would be the signal for an instant fresh attack with the dustcloth.

But whatever the inconvenience of Aunt Gertrude's

domestic activities to Mrs. Willard and the children, Charles was delighted with them. "The house," he pointed out daily to Mrs. Willard, "now looks like a fit place for a gentleman to live in. This is the sort of housekeeping to which I am accustomed—or was accustomed, before I was so imprudent as to marry a girl who had never been properly trained in domestic matters." He chuckled Mrs. Willard indulgently under the chin. "As Richard grows older, I must not fail to point out to him that domesticity in a woman, with all that it implies, is a *sine qua non* for a genuinely happy married life. I do not mean, dear, that I have been unhappy with you; I have not. But a little thought and consideration on your part could have made me happier. See what Aunt Gertrude has accomplished already."

Yes, only see, thought Mrs. Willard, staring resentfully at the picture over the piano and remembering how she had just quieted the natural exuberance of Richard and Laura to allow Aunt Gertrude to get her afternoon nap. Yes, indeed. See what a lovely gilt picture frame. See what charmingly subdued children. See what a blooming, happy wife and mother. See Aunt Gertrude herself, with a fourteen-inch chain of safety pins dangling from the gray bombazine that covered her steep bosom—Aunt Gertrude accumulated safety pins, neither Mrs. Willard nor anyone else knew where or for what purpose, and wore them thus constantly. See how clean the piano was, and how tightly closed—Aunt Gertrude promptly closed it again every time anyone left it open.

Mrs. Willard found herself in violent disagreement with Charles' statement that the Willard household had become "a fit place for a gentleman to live in." A gentleman, it seemed to her, was the last thing one would expect to find here, where a tidied respectability perilously near the vulgar had stripped the rooms and their furnishings of any sug-

gestion of grace and the gentle life. The very chairs looked different to Mrs. Willard; they had a new harshness of outline, a new blatancy of polished surface, a new and unyielding plumpness of cushion, a new and uncompromising squareness of arrangement. No book was ever left open on a chair; no music ever rested beyond the moment of its use against the glittering music rack of the piano; no toy was ever permitted astray either in the house or on the lawn. When Mrs. Willard in a last desperate projection of hope brought in flowers, Aunt Gertrude moved the vases into the exact center of shelf or table and then, with outcries of indignation, lifted them again to place beneath them knitted doilies of her own manufacture.

More and more, as the days and the months went by, Mrs. Willard felt herself becoming detached from the place she still called, by courtesy, her home. Except for her children's need of her she had, she felt, no more meaning or purpose than a vagrant shadow. She had no close friend except Virginia, and Virginia, always erratic, had temporarily disappeared without explanation from her home on the north shore. The thought of the woman's club or of any similar organization was without savor to Mrs. Willard. As for the children, she shrank instinctively from settling the burden of her own need upon their shoulders; and this final conclusion, leaving her nowhere to turn, increased within her the sense of emptiness and silence, of endless waiting and watching for something that would never come.

TIME for Mrs. Willard all her life had alternately leaped and limped, but never had it limped with such monotonous consistency as during the two or three years immediately following the installation of Aunt Gertrude. By that domestic zealot she was effectually forestalled in any chance impulse to bestir herself about the house; such impulses in Mrs. Willard, it must be confessed, were rare, but if she had worked herself to physical exhaustion even once in two or three months it might have roused her at least for a time from the dangerous passivity that now overtook her.

She became an almost pathologic reader, reaching automatically for a book—any book—whenever she sat down, took a bath, went to bed, ate breakfast, or even combed her hair. The gesture of reaching for a book became as characteristic of her as the snapping on of another safety pin to the eternal chain was characteristic of Aunt Gertrude. She grew vague in her conversational responses, except to the children; and, although she maintained with them a relation approximately normal, it was with great and conscious effort that she did so. As the most painful cripple is that unfortunate whose infirmity causes him to hitch along with gestures apparently signifying an exaggerated and clownish gaiety, so that portion of herself which forced her to be blithe with the children seemed to Mrs. Willard now freakish, a pitiable monstrosity escaped from its proper bounds. She was always relieved when Richard and Laura were at school or asleep.

The relation between the two women in the house was a peculiar one. Aunt Gertrude, who had quarreled and contended with her own kin all her life, now over this

trifle, now over that, was at a loss to understand Mrs. Willard's lack of resistance and distrusted her accordingly, as probably sly and secretive. Communication between them was meager, and what there was remained bleak. Mrs. Schnabel, unable to rouse her quasi-antagonist to anything like active opposition, finally contented herself with disapproving daily reports to Charles of Mrs. Willard's lack of domestic skills, laxness in disciplining the children, absent-mindedness, willful stupidity, lack of appreciation of services done her, and general incompetence.

Mrs. Willard did not care.

Virginia, from whom nothing had been heard for months, wrote at last to say that she was sending Edith two of her Persian cats.

"I'm off almost at once to Switzerland," the letter explained, "and I've got to place them somewhere, all of them. I'm sending you Dits and Hallelujah. Hally's a fool, but he's beautiful and has a lahvly disposition. I know you'll cozen them up, darling. They're brother and sister, but not of the same litter. I wish I could see you before I sail, but no can do. G'by now. Write.—Virginia."

The cats arrived next morning. Both were mere kittens, Hallelujah a magnificent male nearly grown, with round amber eyes and, in spite of his youth, a sort of ecclesiastical dignity. Dits was a small ruffled demon with a gingery light in her eyes and the clever facial expression of a terrier pup.

Mrs. Willard, for the first time in months, was highly diverted. She was alone when they arrived, but by the time she had uncrated and fed them Richard and Laura had come quietly in from school together. Aunt Gertrude had long ago discouraged their shouting "Mother!" at the door, as they had been wont to do before her arrival, and they were in the room before Mrs. Willard knew they had come. They stared in pleased surprise at the newcomers.

"Mrs. Teagarden's here!" guessed Richard triumphantly. "Isn't she, Mother?"

Mrs. Willard shook her head. "She just sent us the kittens. She's gone to Switzerland."

Richard stooped from his new and lanky height to scratch Hallelujah behind the ear. "They're cute," he said.

"Darrrling," crowed Laura. "Oh! Look at her!" For Dits, alarmed at being approached by so many strangers, had fled up the curtain at the front window and now clung precariously to the sheer net, switching her tail wildly.

"Wait," said Mrs. Willard. "I'll show you something." She went into a near-by cupboard and brought out a dry-cleaner's envelope, which she unfolded and spread on the floor, placing Hallelujah upon it and motioning the children away. The crackling of the paper under his feet excited Hallelujah; he began a sort of rhythmic dance, his ears cocked interestedly for the engaging sound. Dits, sliding and clutching her way down the curtain, at once joined him. At the first sound of their combined footsteps on the paper both cats went entirely mad; they danced, they rolled, they leaped upon imaginary prey, upon each other; their beautiful eyes gleamed with excitement, their enormous tails waved regally. Mrs. Willard and the children, within a few moments exhausted with laughter, sat on the floor and wept with glee.

To this scene entered Charles and Aunt Gertrude, together. "What, may I inquire, is the meaning of this?" demanded Mr. Willard, his spectacles flashing. "Richard, take those cats outside!"

Mrs. Willard protested quickly. "No, no, Charles! Richard, wait. They're valuable cats, Charles. They're not used to being out-of-doors. They'd be killed in the street. I'm going to keep them in the house—I ——"

Charles motioned the children to leave the room. "Now

what damned foolishness is this?" he demanded. "Where did those cats come from, and what were you thinking of to let them in here, to leave hairs all over the furniture—my furniture, you force me to remind you! Wherever they came from, send Richard back with them at once. You haven't bought them, have you?"

"Virginia sent them to me. I'm going to keep them."

"Ah!" Mr. Willard smiled. "So you're going to keep them. So you're going to keep them. With or without my consent, I presume."

Mrs. Willard drew in her breath. "Yes," she said.

"Hmph!" remarked Aunt Gertrude, with an expectant glance at Charles.

"I haven't got anything," Mrs. Willard broke forth surprisingly. "I haven't got anything at all of my own. Not a single thing. This house is yours. Yours and Aunt Gertrude's. And the children—Charles, I can't live on the children, it's not good for them—I can't—I haven't ——"

"You are hysterical," Charles replied coldly. "Control yourself. I have spoken to you more than once about this ridiculous tendency of yours to become emotional over nothing. I had hoped, of late, that you had conquered it, although I must say your behavior in other respects has been anything but encouraging. You certainly have enough sense to know, my dear, that tactics of this kind will not raise you in my opinion. I detest an assertive woman. As for these cats, if you will not dispose of them I shall be obliged to. And I will." He snorted expressively. "Cats!"

Mrs. Willard tried to speak, but no words came.

"I will allow you three days," said Charles, "to get them out of the house. I am a humane man. You will have ample time to find homes for them if you wish them taken care of. At the end of that time I shall act. I advise you to move as quickly as possible, or you will have trouble with the

children. And I promise you—I promise you,” Charles concluded, smiling, “that this house will not be a pleasant place for you—or the cats—or *the children*—if there is any such trouble, or if the cats have not been removed at the end of three days. That is all I have to say.”

He settled himself in his chair and opened the evening paper. Aunt Gertrude took off her hat and went for a whisk broom. Dits and Hallelujah had gone to sleep in a single silken yellow heap at the end of the davenport. “And I should be obliged,” added Charles after a moment, “if you would hurry dinner. I am nearly famished.”

For a moment Mrs. Willard stood tense in the middle of the room, simmering with inner conflict; then, suddenly, apathy enshrouded her again. “Oh, well,” she said.

In the months that followed the summary ousting of Dits and Hallelujah, for whom she readily found adequate shelter and presumably kind treatment in the home of a former woman’s club acquaintance, Mrs. Willard continued, to all outward appearances, subdued and lethargic, uninterested in anything but the children. But she was not the same. The episode had perturbed her. Mrs. Willard was once more seething with unrest.

“I’m seasick with it,” she told herself. And indeed the nauseous feeling of uncertainty and despair was not unlike seasickness either in the physical qualms it caused her or in the sense of utter hopelessness that accompanied it. She cast about her, desperately, for some means of relief. “‘I cannot steal, to beg I am ashamed,’ ” she quoted irrelevantly. “I can’t draw, sing, act, dance, or paint on velvet; Aunt Gertrude won’t let me keep house. Could I write, I wonder?”

She might, she reflected, glancing at the outmoded juvenile book she had been reading, do an autobiography. *The Autobiography of an Automaton*, in seventeen volumes. *Mrs. Willard Winning Her Way*. *Mrs. Willard on Land and Sea*.

Mrs. Willard in Search of a Status. She imagined the closing scene of the final volume, with her heroine declaiming appropriately: "All that I am, or hope to be, I owe to my beloved husband. . . ."

She was driven for comfort to the children, who were now thirteen and fourteen years old. These had seemed of late to need her less and less, and she had taken pleasure in their sturdiness and self-reliance; but now her whole being rose up in protest against their insolent and preposterous growth. She thought of Richard's little feet tucked softly about with a blue baby blanket—look at them now, great, right-angled things sticking out at the foot of his bed like some uncouth signaling apparatus. She thought of Laura's downy head lying small and round in the crook of her arm, and of the expert care with which that same head was now being burnished, tended, and groomed by a critical and efficient Laura who required the crook of nobody's arm for support.

"But I've got to have *something*," Mrs. Willard remonstrated with fate.

She went in search of Laura, who was sewing buttons on a sweater, and absently sat down on a neat pile of Laura's freshly ironed blouses, rising with guilty haste as her daughter cried out upon her.

"Mother! Oh, you are such a problem child! Here, I'll fix them." Laura swept the blouses into a drawer and patted Mrs. Willard fondly on the cheek. "There. Now you can sit down."

Laura was kind.

Mrs. Willard went to look for Richard. She found him in his own room, in a tangle of radio wires and batteries. Though he greeted her with his usual engaging "Hello, Mother," he looked absorbed, and for some inexplicable reason she was attacked by shyness. Nothing she could think

of was what she wanted to say; yet Richard was obviously—and patiently—waiting for her to say something.

“Do you—do you ——” she began.

Richard waited.

“I’ve been meaning to remind you, Richard, now you’ve grown so big—I don’t see so much of—I mean ——” What was the matter with her? She had not the faintest idea, in the face of Richard’s intent gaze, what it was she wanted to say. Wildly she completed the sentence with the first thing she could think of. “Do you say your prayers every night, dear?”

Richard looked astonished, as well he might. “Oh, no, Mother,” he replied indulgently. “I’m an atheist.” He picked up a coil of wire and waited, smiling at her. “Did you want to talk to me about anything else, Mother?”

—9—

MRS. WILLARD felt dismissed by life. For a time she brooded; then she decided that no life need be empty if its owner chose to fill it, and she made up her mind to seek commercial employment. Charles, who had become impatient with her vague unrests and was entirely comfortable under the ministrations of Aunt Gertrude, did not withhold his consent; and the event was that Mrs. Willard became an indexer of scientific publications and, having repeatedly demanded of life that she must have *something*, discovered to her no small consternation that what she had got was Miss Mothers-head.

The supervisor of indexes, gelid, grim, and watchful, sat at a heaped desk near the front entrance of the indexers’ room. An oscillating electric fan was attached to the wall

above this desk and slightly to the left; there was a defect in the machinery, so that the fan, although it oscillated perfectly from left to right, faltered every time it turned to face Miss Mothershead and sank abruptly back to the end of the circuit with a little metallic suspiration like a gasp of horror. More and more, as the weeks passed, Mrs. Willard reminded herself of this eternally persevering, eternally discouraged mechanism; again and again she made her way toward Miss Mothershead, whirring amiably, only to drop backward in helpless dismay as she met the basilisk glance of the pale-eyed, thin-lipped figure behind the piled sheets of indexes.

This unapproachable quality in Miss Mothershead was pervasive. It cast a gloom, a sort of despairing dampness, over the office. Talking during hours was strictly forbidden, and the indexers worked all day in deadly quiet broken only at the luncheon hour, during which they went away in pairs and little groups and, from long habit, peeped cautiously at each other over their menu cards before they ventured out upon the rocking seas of actual communication. Even their comments on the weather had a tentative sound.

The youngest of them, a black-curled Celtic beauty of twenty-two, was the first to speak to Mrs. Willard of the oppressive atmosphere in the office.

"It's an awful place to work," this child confided, toying with her coffee spoon, her dropped lashes black against her exquisite white skin. "It's clean and comfortable, but ——" She paused and laughed a little, helplessly. "They don't give you any love!"

She gazed unhappily with her enormous shadowed blue-black eyes at Mrs. Willard, and Mrs. Willard gazed unhappily back. The little creature; the pretty creature. Surely she was made for love if ever one was; made to flash in and

out of love like a gorgeous black-and-sapphire butterfly over a swaying cascade of sunlit blossoms. Yet she sat all day bent over a copy stand, writing neatly, marking accurately, alphabetizing endlessly, checking, checking, checking. What a world, felt Mrs. Willard.

Yet she was not so uncomfortable in the office as were many of the others. It was not for her, who had withstood Charles for fifteen years, to quail when Miss Mothershead, like some slit-lidded saurian of the wild, oozed up over the edges of her littered desk and across to some other desk, bearing disaster and swollen with punctual venom; or, if she quailed, to succumb. The others were constantly succumbing. They succumbed weeping and were led away by sympathetic friends; they succumbed stamping and sobbing with fury and departed with a great sound of dust being shaken off the feet; they succumbed a few times swearing, and the familiar expletives of the street, exploding like star shells in the dead atmosphere, took on an astounding and appropriate beauty. Sometimes, miraculously, they got married and departed smiling with uplifted hearts, and a vast wonder was in the office and a bating of breath before this celestial form of rescue.

Mrs. Willard, mildly dogged, continued to learn indexing.

For the few weeks during which she was allowed to keep her salary check and disburse the money as she saw fit for the benefit of herself and her family, she even found her work exhilarating. Charles, however, was discontented with this arrangement, for he felt that neither she nor any other woman was to be trusted with the handling of money. Again, as so often before, Mrs. Willard's passion for peace was her undoing, and it was not long before Charles had the purse strings securely in his own hands and had pensioned her off with five dollars a week for carfare and lunches, sup-

plemented with permission to apply to him concerning her further needs.

Her freedom in managing her money had, to be sure, been largely illusory, as most of it had been absorbed by the requirements of Richard, Laura, and the household. Nevertheless, uneasy recollections of things she had been taught in her infancy concerning taxation without representation persisted in obtruding themselves, and she regarded the innocuous yellow canister of tea on the pantry shelf with obscure resentment.

On the whole, however, she felt better. Not the least element of interest in her new life was the fascination of wondering how, in the time she necessarily spent outside the indexers' office, Miss Mothershead employed herself. The only conjecture that seemed at all consonant with her personality was that she put in the time stirring macerated newts in a caldron, and this, Mrs. Willard felt, was unlikely. When she learned from the lips of Miss Mothershead herself, who had her fleeting moments of pseudo-expansiveness, the nature of one of the unhappy woman's actual forms of self-expression, she was almost too dazed to make any response whatever.

"Three of my friends and I," said Miss Mothershead, her narrow pale eyes blinking, "meet regularly once a week and go without our dinner. We put the money on the table and spend the time talking about Near East relief and reading pamphlets and circulars about it. Then we take all the money and send it to the relief organization."

Mrs. Willard demurred. "But why not just donate the same amount? Why go without your dinner?"

Miss Mothershead dealt her a look of disapprobation mingled with patience. "For the effect of the sacrifice upon our characters, of course," she said.

Mrs. Willard batted her eyes. This was a type of spiritual

bootstrap-lifting she had never before encountered. Nowadays, since she was away from home all day, she was more inclined to conversation with Charles and Aunt Gertrude than she had been for some time, and she recounted this incident in a sprightly manner at dinner that evening, for their delectation. It was not well received.

Charles shook his head gravely. "It is not in good taste, my dear, to say the least, to make fun of a charitable impulse. The poor woman is unmarried and has few emotional outlets. She is doubtless a very worthy person."

Mrs. Willard opened her lips to explain what seemed to her the inconsistency in ethical practice of a department head who deprived herself of her dinner once a week for the benefit of her character and at the same time, between sacrifices, made a regular habit of searching the desks of her subordinates for any evidence that she could use against them; for such, she had recently been informed by persons claiming to be eyewitnesses, was Miss Mothershead's peculiar custom; but Aunt Gertrude interrupted her.

"Mothershead?" she inquired. "Did I understand you to say Mothershead?"

"Yes. Yes, honestly," replied Mrs. Willard, turning eagerly to face her. Was it possible that Aunt Gertrude was about to show a spark of humor?

"Not Althea Mothershead?"

Mrs. Willard, disappointed, hesitated; at first thought it seemed to her that Miss Mothershead had no more need of any additional designation than Bluebeard had. She summoned the name to memory, painstakingly. "I believe it is Althea," she said. "Why?"

Mrs. Schnabel gave her a forbidding look. "I knew her mother. Her mother was one of my best friends. Althea is a very fine girl. I did not know she was in Chicago."

"There, you see, my dear," said Charles rebukingly. "It is never well to speak slightly of anyone without thinking. Aunt Gertrude may well feel that you owe her an apology. I cannot ——"

"I shall call on Althea at once," Aunt Gertrude continued. "I suppose, Charles, that as my friend she would be welcome here if I invited her from time to time?"

"Certainly, Aunt Gertrude. This is your home," replied Charles, with a meaningful side glance at Mrs. Willard, who, appalled as she was at this unexpected turn of affairs, took warning and refrained from speech.

Mrs. Schnabel let no grass grow under her feet. It was less than a week later that Miss Mothershead came to dinner for the first time.

She did not ride home on the elevated with Mrs. Willard, who was her subordinate in the office, but waited a careful half-hour and came alone. Mrs. Willard with widening eyes marked the effusive cordiality with which she was received by Mrs. Schnabel, from whom effusiveness in any direction and for any reason seemed as incongruous as enthusiasm from an armadillo; but her wits were quite equal to the realization that Miss Mothershead had provided Aunt Gertrude at long last with a weapon by means of which she might really hope to harass her niece-in-law. Charles, with pompous courtesy, accorded the visitor all that he considered her due as one introduced by Aunt Gertrude, a woman of property; and Miss Mothershead, taking her cue from him and Mrs. Schnabel, all but ignored the presence of Mrs. Willard. Mrs. Willard herself, feeling suffocated, as soon as dinner was over made an excuse of speaking to the children and followed them upstairs. When she returned, Mrs. Schnabel and Miss Mothershead, who were intimately in conversation—significant conversation, as was evident from

their instant springing apart—deigned to smile propitiatingly at her and to include her, after a fashion, in what further talk preceded the guest's departure.

—10—

THE effect of this renewed acquaintance was immediately apparent in Mrs. Willard's office day. Miss Mothershead had always treated her with aloofness and suspicion; she now began with deliberate malice to persecute her. No error in Mrs. Willard's work, however trifling, was ever passed over without scathing rebuke—necessarily public rebuke, for the room was not large, there were several indexers, and Miss Mothershead took great pains with her articulation. Her enjoyment of these encounters would have been evident to a blind person. The gusty sigh of exaggerated patience, the pushing back of her chair, the sliding chip-chip of her heels as she crossed the room—all were but too eloquent; and to Mrs. Willard, who was not blind and who was at least normally sensitive to public humiliation, the thinly veiled relish expressed in the cold, colorless eyes and the twitching curled lip of her castigator was intolerable. She fixed her gaze instead upon the repulsively veined hands that held the index proofs, and endured it as best she might.

She was able to steel herself to nonresistance only by thinking with desperate determination of Richard and Laura, who would suffer if she were discharged. Charles was not earning enough to maintain them all in anything like comfort; Aunt Gertrude, who by her unnecessary but unceasing household activities indeed more than earned her board, contributed nothing beyond these activities; Mrs. Willard herself was trained for no other work, and the system and

style of indexing she had learned so painfully was indigenous to the publishing house in which she employed it and would be useless elsewhere.

The extreme unpleasantness of what followed her one outburst of open rebellion was, moreover—as Miss Mothershead would undoubtedly have put it—a lesson to her, for the flare-up ended in utter ignominy. Her outburst, if a procedure so restrained may be called an outburst, took place in the middle of one of Miss Mothershead's longer and more scarifying exhortations concerning a reference Mrs. Willard had omitted to check sufficiently. Mrs. Willard rose from her chair and pushed her papers aside.

"You will please accept my resignation, Miss Mothershead," she said clearly and with dignity, and walked from the room.

Her satisfaction in what she had done was as brief as it was fierce. Before she had so much as reached the street she had remembered Charles. What diatribes, what reproaches, what accusations of instability, of having removed a hand once set to the plow, what martyred acceptance of her lack of all the qualities of a true helpmate would be her portion both now and forever if she persisted in this mad course she knew only too well. Already she could hear him: "Very well, my dear, if it is your desire to pursue an idle and useless existence, by all means let it be so. You are not needed at home; Aunt Gertrude manages things better, far better, than you have ever seen fit to do. Your taking this position in the first place was not, if you remember, through any action or desire of mine. It was your own idea. If you have so little constancy of purpose as to give up your work at the first little unpleasantness! . . . Furthermore, remember that Miss Mothershead is Aunt Gertrude's intimate friend. I doubt whether you will find the atmosphere any too pleasant at home now, either for yourself or for the children."

There it was. The children. He could always threaten her with the children. And she would always yield. Oh, yes, she would yield. The all but insuperable inertia induced by years of submission was once again too much for her. Sickened throughout her physical being, torn inwardly with a clawing and retching self-contempt, Mrs. Willard retraced her steps, entered the elevator, got off at her accustomed floor, and sat down at her desk again.

Miss Mothershead turned, greatly enjoying both the spectacle of Mrs. Willard's flaming countenance and the sensation in the room. "Why, Mrs. Willard!" she exclaimed with a mincing exaggeration of a tone of pleased surprise. "I was under the impression that you had left us."

"I have changed my mind," responded Mrs. Willard curtly.

Miss Mothershead made as if to act further, but apparently took second thought and turned back to her work. There would be time enough later, Mrs. Willard reflected, for Miss Mothershead's revenge. There would be all the time there was. And the revenge would lose nothing in the interval. Not even to the office would it be confined; Mrs. Willard knew with instant certainty that Aunt Gertrude would hear of it in time, and, consequently, Charles. She had, she concluded, got herself into a pretty fix indeed.

In this she was not mistaken. The senseless recriminations, direct on the part of Charles and Aunt Gertrude, subtly disguised and calculatingly staged by Miss Mothershead, continued for months. But the breaking point was near. The gathering tension within Mrs. Willard would not much longer brook confinement. A smoldering resentment toward practically everything and everybody in her life was taking shape in her mind, and the element of self-pity, hitherto abortive in her, was rising to the level of her consciousness. Resentment amounting to fury began to possess

her when, like Milton, she considered how her light was spent ere half her days in this dark world and wide. For surely light, that blessed tool of life, had not been meant for spending on indexes.

Nor had its glory been meant to pass unnoticed while she wore herself out acting as a buffer between Charles and Richard, whose conflicts, as the boy grew older, arose with heightened frequency and rancor; nor, for that matter, while she endeavored privately to convey to Charles a sense of those changes incident to social evolution which made his disciplinary restrictions so galling to the spirit of his son. It was a fruitless endeavor at best; social evolution, as he had frequently informed her in set terms, was no concern of Charles.

Better uses for light might be found, too, than the daily presentation of Miss Mothershead and her accusing "You haven't bothered yourself too much about accuracy here, have you, Mrs. Willard? Here's a reference——"

And so, as day followed day and week followed week and month followed month and year followed year, these resentments, feeding upon themselves, grew to portentous size and energy, and on a quiet April Saturday at the end of the third year Mrs. Willard said, breathing hard, "I'd like my library card, Charles," and Mr. Willard said, "Do you want me to swear at you?" . . .

On that day, as Mrs. Willard began to ascend the stairway at the elevated railway station, her hand shook on the railing. Three years of it, spring rain, summer blaze, autumn wind, winter ice. Three years of Miss Mothershead. Three more years of Charles. Five dollars a week—and her library card sticking in Charles' mirror. . . . She paused and gasped, trying to keep from crying; she snatched open her purse to get at her handkerchief, and as she did so she stopped short on the stairway.

The purse had nearly seventy dollars in it.

For a moment, forgetting where it had come from, she actually swayed. Then she remembered. Every week she cashed her own salary check and Charles', for Charles was sensitive about the amount of his and spared himself this embarrassment. She was always required to turn over all except her five dollars at once. However, on the preceding evening Charles had been out late, returning after she had gone to bed, and the argument about the library card this morning had driven the transaction from both their minds.

Mrs. Willard stood still where she was and let the hurrying men and women push past her, ignoring their curious or indignant glances. Seventy dollars. She must go back, before Charles had left the house, and give it to him.

Seventy dollars. Mrs. Willard recalled the banishing of Dits and Hallelujah, and her spiritless acquiescence; the defiant moment when she had faced Miss Mothershead, and the shameful defeat that had followed it. And now once again she must yield; she must return meekly to Charles, while yet her library card was fixed in the edge of his mirror, and meekly turn over this money.

"I won't," said Mrs. Willard aloud.

She looked challengingly about her as though she expected Charles to appear. But for once he did not. She began her renewed ascent of the stairs, but slowly. There was a motor-bus station across the street, with a vast orange-and-black sign. Slowly but brilliantly resolution dawned in Mrs. Willard's eyes. With an inarticulate sound she fled back down the stairs and across the street, bursting into the bus station like one pursued.

The attendant at the window looked up, not much surprised. "Where'd you wish to go, madam?" he inquired.

Mrs. Willard paused but a moment. Her mind, now triumphantly the mind of an indexer, began at the begin-

ning. Aalborg, Abyssinia, Admiralty Island, Aix-la-Chapelle, Alaska, Albuquerque, Allahabad, Amsterdam, Anacostia, Appomattox, Archangel . . .

Suddenly from some forgotten corner of her memory a spray of flowering dogwood appeared before her eyes. Yes, it was April. She drew a long breath of ecstasy at the lovely vision and turned to the man in the window with stars in her eyes.

"I'm going to Arkansas," said Mrs. Willard. . . .

So imperfect is the finite mind for apprehension of the purposes of destiny that Mrs. Willard, awakening some hours later to find herself in an unmistakable hospital bed, with a heavy cast on her left forearm and sundry generous patches of plaster scattered here and there over her person, actually thought, and briefly wept to think, that she had been once more thwarted by a pitiless fate. There was no escape for her, she told herself, moaning; there would be no escape forever.

With her mind still sliding weakly back and forth from what remained of the anesthetic, she tried to recall what had happened to her. At first she remembered only a concerted shouting of alarmed voices and the bus driver's frantic yell: "She's goin' crazy! I can't control her!" and then, senselessly, "Jump, why don't you? Why don't you jump?" There had been a splintering of glass, a numbing shock, a stab of lightning pain in her arm from wrist to shoulder, the roughness of grass and stubble against her face; she remembered looking at her wrist, trying to move it, hearing the lightly muffled multiple grating of the shattered bones under the flesh; with the last darkening of the light she had seen the wrist humped up queerly, curving like a fork. Then nothing.

And now the hospital. A smiling nurse paused beside the bed. "Well, well!" she exclaimed with professional good cheer, smiling at Mrs. Willard. "Awake at last, aren't we?—

and feeling better. That was a nasty bump you had." She pulled away the covers and examined Mrs. Willard briefly. "Goodness, you're certainly going to look like the map of the world for a while. Those bruises! You certainly had a lucky escape." She replaced the covers and held her thermometer up to the light in preparation for taking the patient's temperature.

Mrs. Willard, making an effort, whispered: "Where am I? I mean, where is this hospital?"

"What hospital is this, do you mean?" asked the nurse. "This is St. Stephen's. No, no, dear, you mustn't try to sit up!"

"Not—not *Chicago*?" whispered Mrs. Willard.

"Why, yes, honey. Here, let's fix that pillow. You mustn't try to move so suddenly. Did you think you were clear out of town? No, indeed. The crash was inside the city limits and everyone that was hurt was rushed right here. You're right at home." She smiled brightly.

Mrs. Willard began to laugh uncontrollably and was immediately sick. "Charles——" she gasped weakly as the paroxysm subsided.

"Your husband? He and your aunt have already been here, but you were still asleep. They'll be back later. Don't you worry." The nurse patted Mrs. Willard reassuringly on the shoulder.

—11—

"You have caused me," pronounced Charles, his spectacles glittering with controlled fury, "to depart from the principles of a lifetime."

Mrs. Willard said nothing. Aunt Gertrude, seated a little farther from the bed, nodded resignedly.

"I have represented to Miss Mothershead that you were called away suddenly by news of serious illness in your family and were injured before you had got out of town. I have told the same story to the children. Kindly see to it that you do not undeceive them."

Mrs. Willard did not speak.

"Not only have you forced me—me!—into the dishonor of misrepresenting the facts to your employers and to my own children," continued Charles, "not only have you flouted my authority as head of the family by proposing to go on a trip without consulting me; not only have you insulted me as your husband, forgotten your duty to your home and your children, humiliated me before Aunt Gertrude, and made yourself ridiculous by flying off the handle like a half-baked schoolgirl, but you have actually been guilty of a criminal act. You took money that did not belong to you, money from our common fund, which should have been sacred to you. Do you know what that is called, my dear?" He smiled, showing his teeth. "That is called theft. Theft."

Aunt Gertrude nodded again. Mrs. Willard, whose hands had begun to twitch on the counterpane, still did not speak.

"Most of the money, fortunately—all except what you spent for the ticket—I have recovered from your purse. But the principle remains the same. And, moreover——"

The nurse entered. "Sorry; time's up," she said pleasantly. "This little lady's had a hard bump, and she needs to rest now until tomorrow." She advanced toward the bed.

Charles flashed his glasses upon her. "I have not finished speaking with my wife," he informed her stiffly. "Kindly leave us alone."

The nurse stood her ground. "I'm sorry, Mr. Willard——"

"Dr. Willard, if you please," corrected Charles with icy distinctness.

"You're a doctor?" The nurse's eyes widened. "But then, surely ——"

"Damned stupidity!" Charles muttered quite audibly. Then, directly to the nurse, "Be good enough to step outside for a few moments. My aunt and I will leave in due time."

"I can't do that, sir. I'm sorry. My orders ——"

A stout, elderly physician with white hair and a truculent expression suddenly appeared in the doorway. "What is it, Miss Havens?"

"It's Dr. Griffith's orders, Dr. Kellway, that this patient mustn't have visitors yet for more than ten minutes at a time. The time's up, and ——"

"Certainly," agreed Dr. Kellway brusquely. He glanced at Mrs. Willard's jerking fingers and, crossing to the bed, laid a big hand on her forehead for a moment. "This patient must rest. At once," he added, as the visitors made no move to go.

"Very well." Charles rose at length and deliberately reached for his hat. "I suppose, Aunt Gertrude, we must yield to the pontifical supremacy of the all-knowing medical profession." He bowed to the doctor with exaggerated courtesy and turned back for a moment to Mrs. Willard. "I hope you will be feeling somewhat stronger tomorrow, my dear, for I have much to discuss with you." He turned away.

"Charles—the children ——" choked Mrs. Willard.

"Well?" He halted at the door. "The children?"

"I want—I want to see them," whispered Mrs. Willard.

Charles hesitated, obviously forming new objurgations in his mind, and Dr. Kellway interposed. "Certainly, Mrs. Willard," he replied with hearty promptness. "The children may come down to see you tomorrow." He turned to Charles. "It is quite necessary—absolutely necessary, you under-

stand—that Mrs. Willard's mind be put at rest and kept at rest until she has had time to recover from the shock of her injury. Good-by." He closed the door.

Tears were crowding from under Mrs. Willard's closed eyelids. "He won't let them come," she whispered weakly.

"What, Mrs. Willard?" Dr. Kellway and the nurse returned to the bedside. "Oh, yes, he will," Dr. Kellway promised, after a quick explanation from Miss Havens. "He'll let them come, all right. Don't you worry, Mrs. Willard. They'll be down to see you tomorrow."

And they were—though by what maneuvering on the part of Dr. Kellway Mrs. Willard never learned. The sight of their white scared faces, the quick tears in Laura's eyes as she bent to kiss her mother, touched Mrs. Willard beyond her control; she broke again into silent, helpless weeping. "I'm all right, my darlings!" she assured them over and over, weakly, trying to smile comfortingly at them.

Richard and Laura sat looking at her, not knowing what to say. "I joined the chess club at school," Richard offered at last.

"Did you, dearest?" whispered Mrs. Willard. "That's nice."

"Can't you talk out loud at all, Mother?" asked Laura, her eyes filling again.

"I'm—just too lazy to try, I suppose." Mrs. Willard tried to summon an accent of cheer. But at this point Richard, who had been turning and turning his algebra textbook in his hands, suddenly burst into an adolescent boy's painful, croaking sobs. "Mother!" he begged her. "Mother, you aren't going to die, are you? Mother!"

"Of course not, darling. No. No. Please don't, Richard. Please don't, dear. I'm all right. I'll be all right in no time. I'm just tired. Laura, lend him your handkerchief, dear. Quick. Here comes Miss Havens."

Richard dashed his hand against his eyes and moved quickly to the window.

"Time's up," chirped Miss Havens blithely. "My, my, you certainly have a nice boy and girl there, Mrs. Willard, haven't you? Doesn't seem like you're old enough to have such big children. Well," she smiled at Richard and Laura, "your mamma's lots better today, isn't she? She'll be home again, good as new, in no time now. Nothing to worry about! Better let her rest now, hadn't we? Good-by. Come again soon."

The children kissed Mrs. Willard. "Good-by, Mother."

"Good-by, darlings," she whispered. "Be good. Don't worry about me. I'm all right. You heard Miss Havens say there's nothing to worry about."

But Miss Havens, together with several of the staff physicians, was constrained a little later to change her mind; for Mrs. Willard in the middle of that night went into a high fever and an uncontrollable delirium, and for more than three weeks knew nothing at all of Charles, of the children, of Aunt Gertrude, of Miss Mothershead, or of the contrition she might reasonably have been expected to feel concerning her own recent deplorable activities.

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THIS unexpected seizure aroused interest among the members of the hospital staff. Mrs. Willard, who was unaccustomed to being the center of so much attention, endured the successive and varied probings and examinations that marked her early convalescence in a mental state compounded equally of bewilderment and boredom. She was not in the least interested, herself, in her condition or in what

had caused it. The doctors, however, were eager; and, although they were both considerate and kind, they were looked upon with distrust by Mrs. Willard, who had begun to dislike men merely as men, because they reminded her of Charles.

Charles himself had appeared at the hospital only once since her return to consciousness and reason, and then for a hurried visit. He seemed brisker than usual and slightly less censorious, pointing out to her only once that her weakened state and its cost to him were nobody's fault but her own. Mrs. Willard attributed the briskness, from her knowledge of Charles, to the added sense of importance he obtained from being in sole charge of the household. To his single reproach she simply closed her mind, an act made possible only by the debilitation resulting from her illness. In health her mind was obstinate, remaining uncompromisingly open no matter with what panting desperation she set her shoulder against it, but now it closed with magical readiness at the bare touch of a finger. That was restful. That was very restful. Mrs. Willard sank her head pleasantly deeper into the pillow, enjoying the ease of not thinking, floating idly and delightfully in a sort of semiconscious trance of detachment.

Occasionally some sound in the corridor outside would penetrate her reverie—the subdued clatter of dishes and trays, a curt order, an exaggerated sigh of annoyance; and once a furious oath. The voice was a man's, lowered even in rage. Its exasperation was like the sound of a snapped cord: "No, no, no, no, Christ damn it! Not that one. The other one!" There followed a frightened murmur and scurrying footsteps, and then silence.

Mrs. Willard's mind, roused temporarily from its exhaustion, noted briefly the difference that may exist between two swearing men—for the speaker had not sounded in the

least like Charles—and slid by easy degrees back into semi-consciousness.

She had spent much time lately in this supine mental posture, though she was usually interrupted midway of her musings by the arrival of yet another doctor to perform yet another kind of examination. Mrs. Willard had arrived at the point where, if it had not been so much trouble, she might have reached for one of the firm little rubber hammers that protruded so temptingly from the pockets of their white hospital jackets, and . . .

The hearty voice of Dr. Griffith, the surgeon who had treated her wrist, broke in upon her. "Well, Mrs. Willard!" he boomed. "Don't tell me you're asleep again. I know better; I'm on to you. Wake up and let me introduce Dr. Maclane, of the neurosurgical staff. He's just got back from Hungary, and I want him to look into this little affair you've been having with the sandman. Hey?"

Mrs. Willard opened her eyes resignedly. "How do you do, Dr. Maclane," she said civilly, and shut them again.

"How are you, Mrs. Willard?" responded Dr. Maclane, sitting down beside the bed.

"I'll leave it to you, Alec," Dr. Griffith said cheerfully. "Don't be alarmed, Mrs. Willard, if he asks you a lot of personal questions. These neurologists nowadays won't stick to their ganglia, you know; got to dabble in psychiatry too. But they mean well, they mean well." He bustled out and closed the door behind him.

There was silence in the room for so long that Mrs. Willard was all but constrained to open her eyes. Just before she did so, however, Dr. Maclane spoke.

"You are married, Mrs. Willard? Or widowed?"

"I am a good deal more married," Mrs. Willard replied distinctly, her eyes still closed, "and a good deal less widowed, than anybody you are likely ever to have seen before."

"I see. And you are—how old?"

Mrs. Willard set her teeth and repeated once again the endless data concerning her history, medical and personal, her life, her children, and her present state of health from the subjective standpoint. Dr. Maclane took rapid notes. "You are young," he remarked at length, "to have children nearly sixteen and seventeen years old. Your husband is considerably older." He paused, then suddenly shot a question at her: "Do you love your husband?"

Mrs. Willard allowed her eyes to open far enough to give him an expressive look, which appeared to satisfy him. "Are you in love with anyone else?" he continued.

"Put my neck in that noose a second time? No, thank you," answered Mrs. Willard, closing her eyes again.

"Neither love nor biology has anything to do with nooses, Mrs. Willard."

"Neither love nor biology will have anything to do with me either, Dr. Maclane, if I can help it." Mrs. Willard opened her eyes again, this time completely, and met his gaze squarely. At full sight of him she started slightly; she knew, as though she had seen it, that this was the man who had cried, "No, no, no, no, Christ damn it! Not that one. The other one!" She turned her head away. "Need we discuss this matter further?"

"I think so, Mrs. Willard." His own gaze, as their eyes met and locked, was calm now, professionally interested and impersonal. He was attractive, she reluctantly admitted to herself, in spite of the restlessness and potential irritability that lay beneath the carefully controlled surface of his manner. There was a suggestion of strength, of unlimited nervous energy perpetually at variance with profound nervous strain, about his dark, clearly marked countenance and the tautness of his wide shoulders. He would be tall if he stood up. Taller than Charles by several inches.

"How long have you felt this way, Mrs. Willard," he pursued, "about love—'and biology'?"

Mrs. Willard made no answer.

"Well, let's go back a little." Dr. Maclane tried another tack. "How did you come to marry a man you didn't love, and a man so much older than yourself? Or did you think you were in love with him? Or were you, perhaps, actually in love with him at the time?"

"If I could answer any of those questions, Dr. Maclane," replied Mrs. Willard wearily, "I should probably not stand in need of your services today. If I do," she added with unconcealed resentment. He had aroused her; the irritation of his questions had pulled her once for all out of her comfortable lethargy. "If you'd only—if all of you would only leave me alone!" she cried. "I don't know why I married him, I tell you. I just married him. Maybe I wanted to be a member of the Faculty Dames. I was eighteen. What did I know about what I wanted?"

"Eighteen. You left college to be married?"

"I was through college."

"Oh?" Dr. Maclane gave her a keen look and changed his line of questioning. "Earlier, then: as a girl of high-school age, had you a great many—ah—'boy friends'?"

"None," replied Mrs. Willard.

"None?"

"I was not popular with boys of my own age," Mrs. Willard explained in the tone of one reciting a set and memorized speech.

"Why not? Too intellectual?"

She made an impatient gesture. "How should I know?"

Dr. Maclane leaned back in his chair. "Do you recall any incident—any unpleasantness, perhaps—in connection with a boy during that period?"

"Yes," answered Mrs. Willard unexpectedly. "The first

boy I ever went out with told everybody in school I had asked him to take me."

"What made him do that, do you suppose?"

"What?" asked Mrs. Willard. "Oh. I did ask him."

"You did?" Dr. Maclane repeated, a faint amusement in his dark eyes as he surveyed Mrs. Willard's candid countenance. "What a wonder child he must have been," he commented, "to drive you to such lengths!"

"A wonder child? Pedestrian?" Mrs. Willard laughed shortly. "Heavens, no."

"Pedestrian?"

"His name was Walker. Walker Wainwright. So he was called Pedestrian," Mrs. Willard explained without interest. "He looked a good deal like a mule," she added meditatively.

"My word. Then what did you want with him?"

"I didn't want him. I wanted to go to the party. It was a class party. The others were all dated up. He was the only one left." Mrs. Willard's gentle features took on a sort of reminiscent stubbornness. "He tried to get out of it," she recalled complacently, "but he couldn't. So he took me."

"Perhaps," suggested Dr. Maclane, "your marriage was based upon much the same sort of motivation. Perhaps you 'wanted to go to the party'—that is, to enter into the adult world of married life—and merely jumped to the somewhat premature conclusion that the man you married was 'the only one left.' What do you think of that possibility?"

Mrs. Willard shrugged her shoulders. "I shouldn't wonder. It doesn't matter."

The doctor regarded her appraisingly. "You certainly know, Mrs. Willard," he commented at last, "that you are a very attractive woman now. You cannot, I think, have been unlovely as a girl."

"Unlovely?" Mrs. Willard looked startled, meeting his direct gaze. "Why—why, no. On the contrary, I was quite

pretty, I believe." Her tone suggested that she had never considered the matter before.

Maclane laughed dryly. "You're rather surprising, as a woman."

"Why 'as a woman'?"

He shrugged. "Your delightful sex is not, as a rule, so casual about that particular matter."

"Neither is yours. So why 'as a woman'?"

"Very well; as a person, then." He looked at her speculatively. "I should like to have seen you all the way up, I think—as a baby; as a little girl going to school; as a relentless high-school maenad bent on snaffling that poor Pedestrian; and—well, just before your marriage perhaps."

He smiled suddenly and charmingly, and Mrs. Willard, who had begun a flippant reply, "Well, I have photographs," found before she finished the sentence that something had happened to her. Her mind, racing ahead of her stammering speech, was without words talking to Dr. Maclane, pleading with him to listen: I could show you, Dr. Maclane, if I had the photographs here. I could show you a baby in a white drawnwork dress, a nice baby, so soft, so blue-eyed and trusting; you would have liked that baby, Dr. Maclane. I could show you a little girl five years old, ready for her first day of school, all solemn eyes and brown curls and blue-checked gingham, holding her big Teddy bear beside her on the piano stool, and the starched embroidery of her panties just barely showing under the gingham pleats. You would have liked the little girl too, you would have laughed tenderly at her; I should like to hear you laugh tenderly, Dr. Maclane. I could show you a girl of sixteen and you would laugh again, but only to yourself this time, for she was beautiful then, but with the absurd and exquisite sadness of youth that has nothing to be sad about. . . . And I could tell you what she was like at eighteen,

Dr. Maclane, though I haven't any photograph, you'd have to take my word for that; now she is tall and slim and in bloom, now she wears a brown coat and a soft brown hat and walks in the woods with her dog and gathers bittersweet and trailing red vines and berries: and now you would not laugh at all, Dr. Maclane, but your breath would come a little quicker and a little deeper, because you would know, Dr. Maclane, you are not stupid like other men, you would know what it was that waited there for you, and you would come and take it, and there would be a hard little shudder of delight at the girl's heart for what you would find there—oh, not unlovely, not unlovely, Dr. Maclane.

Mrs. Willard caught her breath. "I could show you, if I had the photographs," she repeated lamely.

Dr. Maclane looked at her with curious intentness; it was almost as though he had shared her passionate thoughts. "There's no need," he said, rising. "I have a pretty good idea, I think. I'll not trouble you with any more questions today. Probably all you need is a good rest. We'll start planning tomorrow how you can get it."

Mrs. Willard smiled at him. She had the feeling, inexplicable but definite, that this moment marked the end of a breathless and delightful adventure she had had in common with Dr. Maclane. Did he feel this too? Probably not. Probably the quality in his personality that had produced this odd result was only a part of his professional equipment, which he turned on and off at will. Mrs. Willard did not care. She felt, for the first time in her life, like a woman of experience. She wanted, above everything else on earth, merely to be alone; alone for hours, that she might brood in peace over her newly acquired and vaguely outlined but ineffably delicious past.

THE heart that has never known plenty will feast on a crumb. When Mrs. Willard recalled the sudden and inexplicable sympathy that had sprung up between her and Dr. Maclane, that memory, complete in itself, was the whole of her impression. Yet she was conscious of a new feeling, intensified by the cleansed and expectant freshness that often follows a severe illness—a faint, sweet troubling of sense like the long humming of a violin string lightly plucked. Her mind, entirely virginal after eighteen years of marriage with Charles, had as yet no part in the slow awakening of her heart and body and could not tell her that in both, as surely as in the quivering heart and body of the young girl who finds and accepts love almost as soon as she is able to speak the word, there plunged the frail and exquisite pulses of pristine desire. The happiness that arose in her again and again, as she lay there dreaming, she attributed to a totally different cause; she was happy, she thought, because of the blissful prospect of the “good rest” that had been promised her.

To her considerable astonishment, Charles had made no real outcry at the proposal of her physicians that she spend at least two months at a quiet lakeside resort in northern Indiana. He did, it is true, point out to her that except for Aunt Gertrude’s generosity this project would be out of the question. Aunt Gertrude had, it seemed, voluntarily offered to pay all the expenses involved.

“But what about the bus company?” murmured Mrs. Willard, who, to her considerable astonishment, had a few days before been presented with what seemed to her a stag-

gering sum of money—almost an independent fortune, she thought proudly—in compensation for her accident.

Charles stiffened. "I have thought best to deposit the bus company's check toward the children's college education. In your name, of course. We will not touch that, I think, since Aunt Gertrude is so generous. Aunt Gertrude has even offered to send the children out to you every other Saturday or Sunday. It is more than you deserve, my dear, all things considered."

He chuckled her under the chin. Charles was in excellent humor; he keenly appreciated himself in the role of benefactor, even of benefactor once removed. "Much more than you deserve," he repeated, shaking his finger at her.

Aunt Gertrude, who nearly always accompanied Charles on his visits to the hospital, came near nodding agreement with this but controlled the impulse in time. "I hope," she said instead, unclosing her lips as deliberately as though a thin layer of some good mucilage had been spread between them, "that the rest will do you good, both physically and—both physically and in every other way. You need have no anxiety about your household duties, nor about Charles."

Mrs. Willard murmured appropriately. The swelling smugness of Aunt Gertrude's manner must, she thought, be a strain upon her very corset stays; Mrs. Willard could imagine the chain of safety pins, which Aunt Gertrude fortunately did not wear on public excursions, clicking in agitation before its impact. But it was entirely beyond her enfeebled powers to resent either this patronage or the oppressive benevolence of her husband. The bare thought of two months spent away from both of them—and from Miss Mothershead!—made her all but hysterical with relief.

"What about Miss Mothershead?" she asked faintly.

Charles flashed his pince-nez at her. "Your comments on Miss Mothershead have done her great injustice. I called

upon her yesterday to discuss the situation and found her most understanding and co-operative. She will arrange your leave of absence—without pay, of course.”

“Althea Mothershead is a very fine girl,” interpolated Aunt Gertrude, fixing Mrs. Willard with a gaze in which implied comparisons bulged like potatoes in a bag.

“I have also,” continued Charles, “visited the resort suggested by Dr. Griffith. It is run by a Mrs. Metz, who seems a thoroughly decent woman. It is a pleasant place, clean and quiet, and the beds and food are good. The surrounding landscape is attractive also.” He cleared his throat. “All that now remains is to make definite reservations, which I shall do as soon as I receive notice of your discharge from the hospital.”

He rose, and Aunt Gertrude rose with him. “Good-by, my dear.” He bent and pecked formally at Mrs. Willard’s forehead.

Mrs. Willard, left alone, brooded for a time upon the power of money. Charles had, she was sure, adopted his unexpectedly complaisant attitude toward her unorthodox vacation only in response to Aunt Gertrude’s manifest wishes, though why Aunt Gertrude should wish her to have a vacation, unorthodox or otherwise, was a mystery she could not explain. Mrs. Willard knew Aunt Gertrude much too well to assume for a moment that this generosity was disinterested.

“She’s probably as glad to have me out of her way as I am to get rid of her. But Charles ——”

At thought of her husband she found it necessary once more to control the rising of strong distaste. Aunt Gertrude’s lightest word, it seemed, was law to Charles. Ever since the older woman had entered the house she had been its actual head, its determining factor in all matters of question; and the only possible explanation of this, it seemed to Mrs. Willard, was Charles’ exaggerated sense of the importance her

“property” gave her. Mrs. Willard, who had never been able to work up much interest in money except when the children were threatened by its lack, found this adulation difficult both to comprehend and to condone. Irresistibly, an old nursery rhyme floated to the surface of her mind:

*There was a crooked man
And he went a crooked mile;
He found a crooked sixpence
Upon a crooked stile;
He bought a crooked cat,
Which caught a crooked mouse;
And they all lived together
In a little crooked house.*

A little crooked house. . . . This description of her own home, since Mrs. Schnabel had come to live therein, struck Mrs. Willard as extraordinarily apposite. It was odd that it should be so, for surely a straighter little house, so far as doilies and rugs and straitly distributed rows of kitchen utensils were concerned, had never been seen. Yet the crookedness was there. Mrs. Willard saw it in the obeisance of Charles to his aunt’s “property”; in the irritation and suspicion that characterized the habitual attitude of both aunt and nephew toward Richard and Laura and their occasional youthful lapses into irresponsibility, always identified by both Charles and Aunt Gertrude with insolence, disobedience, and lack of proper respect; and in the general atmosphere of self-satisfaction and insistent respectability that filled the place like a musty odor. A little crooked house, and Aunt Gertrude the crooked cat, watching and watching. . . .

These thoughts became quickly intolerable. Mrs. Willard turned from them to her inner vision, compounded just now of her memory of Dr. Maclane and the prospect of the all-glorious two months that lay ahead of her. About five days must pass, she had been told, before she could be discharged

from the hospital. Five days, and then four days, and then three days——

She saw Dr. Maclane but twice before her departure; the first time for a complete neurologic examination, which was happily reported as having given negative results, and the second time when he paused in her doorway for a moment the day before she left, and saw her sitting by the window with the cast on her arm supported by the arm of her chair. He called, unsmilingly, "Well, Mrs. Willard! Feeling better?"

Mrs. Willard smiled radiantly at him. "I feel wonderful."

"You look it. Well—have a nice summer." He hesitated, as though about to enter; then he nodded abruptly and passed on.

A nice summer. What a phrase, Mrs. Willard thought, smiling. It was heaven, after all, he was describing. Surely some loftier language would be more fitting.

Mrs. Willard at this point wandered off into a tossing forest of loftier language and spent a diverting hour imagining how selected portions of it would sound, coming from Dr. Maclane. Of home and Charles she thought no more that day.

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IN SPITE of much credible evidence to the contrary, no five-day period is actually endless. The day of release at length arrived. On the short train trip to her haven of rest Mrs. Willard was duly accompanied by her husband, whose manner continued to suggest a high magnanimity bent upon doing its full duty even to the undeserving. From time to time, as the train reached open country and shot past woods, flashes of bright water, silvery half-hidden trails, and finally

great rolling dunes of tufted sand, Charles kindly pointed out and described these various beauties of nature to Mrs. Willard, who was already drunken with them; and at the little wayside station where they alighted he magnificently called the local taxicab, a ramshackle but carefree Ford of indeterminate age and habits, to carry them a distance that was less than one Chicago block. Mrs. Willard, who had brought as little luggage as possible—not more than Charles could easily have carried—would have enjoyed the trifling walk, but surprise prevented her saying so until it was too late.

The inn, a pleasant, wide-porched white frame affair suggesting a more than ordinarily comfortable farmhouse, stood a little way back from the road, surrounded by trees and small white-painted cottages with green shutters. Mrs. Willard looked hopefully at the cottages, but upon inquiry found that Charles had engaged her room in the main inn.

“You will be more comfortable there,” he said, “with the bath and the other conveniences under the same roof. Those in the cottages must use a separate bathhouse.”

Mrs. Willard acknowledged the validity of this argument in view of her recent illness. She was in no mood to quibble over details. She smiled at Mrs. Metz, a lean, hard-worked, bright-eyed woman with a flowered apron covering her neat, dark house dress, and, on being left alone with Charles in the room allotted to her, sighed deeply with pure satisfaction. It was not a large room, but it was large enough. It contained nothing but bare essentials—a bed, a wooden rocking chair with a cushion, two straight chairs, a dresser, and a small clothespress. The light dangled from a cord in the middle of the ceiling. The floor was covered with a gay linoleum rug, and the bedspread was white and immaculately clean. A scraped and polished cleanliness, indeed, was ap-

parent everywhere; there seemed not a fleck of dust on anything.

Charles, in the character of bustling host, became expansive. "Well, dear, how do you like it? Can you be comfortable here for two months?"

"It's heavenly," said Mrs. Willard. "Heavenly." She lay down on the bed and closed her eyes; then, opening them, she looked out at the window and suddenly sat up, astonished at the vast stretch of sky and slowly swaying trees that could be seen therefrom. "I'll be able to see the stars at night!" she pointed out ecstatically to Charles.

"Naturally. Why not?" her spouse returned, a little impatient with this emphasis upon the obvious. "I hope, my dear, by the way, that you will try to conduct yourself during your stay here with some degree of propriety. You have a tendency to be overemotional. Don't allow yourself to become entangled with all sorts of chance acquaintances. Your behavior, remember, reflects upon me."

A dimple, ordinarily invisible, appeared at one corner of Mrs. Willard's expressive mouth. "What on earth do you think I'm going to do, Charles?"

"God alone knows," said Charles in a moment of unprecedented naturalness.

Mrs. Willard laughed delightedly. "Why, Charles!"

But Charles was already ashamed of his lapse into the commonplace. "The children will be out to see you at the end of next week," he announced stiffly, and took his leave.

Mrs. Willard did not let this minor disappointment weigh upon her spirits. The delicious bareness of her little room, the stripping away of all clutter from her immediate surroundings, as from her life itself, was nectar to her spirit; and the privacy, the privacy! Mrs. Willard looked at the wide white empty expanse of bed at her side and rolled joyfully into it, her still immobilized arm held carefully in the

air; then she lay still, lowering the arm, and listened to the blessed silence closing in. Dinner was several hours away, and she was tireder than she realized. In ten minutes she was asleep.

When the first bell rang for dinner some time later and Mrs. Willard, awakened, found herself still incredibly unburdened, carefree, and alone, a lightheaded gaiety that was almost intoxication possessed her. She felt like a little girl with a trip to the circus in the offing; this was the first evening, only the first few hours, of a flashing cycle of joy. No more than the little girl on her way to the circus did Mrs. Willard doubt that the two months by the lake would be all joy, for no experience in her past, however harrowing, had been able to make any permanent dent in her infrangible inner hopefulness. Again and again, with a rainbow round her shoulder and speeding toward the stars, she had been halted in mid-flight and brought to earth by a most painful arrow from some unexpected sniper and scurf of hell; but she had learned nothing. Mrs. Willard was ready to hope again.

She changed to a fresh dress and rearranged her hair—not without difficulty, for the heavy cast made these operations awkward indeed. A babble of consciously well-bred voices from below drifted in as she opened her door; that would be, she conjectured, the older guests of the inn, who like herself had been dozing in their rooms and cottages and had made for the dining room at the first sound of the bell.

She met only one person on the stairs, a fat man, red and truculent of face, who stood aside with a sort of grudging wheeze to allow her to precede him.

“Thank you,” said Mrs. Willard sunnily.

“Urf,” replied the fat man with no change of expression.

The large dining room held a sprinkling of elderly per-

sons, already seated in little groups at the long tables. Two earnest and motherly ladies were discussing some new book, the one speaking in a deliberate and judicial manner, the other listening in a brightness of attention so liquidly profuse that in a moment, so it seemed to Mrs. Willard, it would be streaming off her face like tears and require to be mopped up from the floor. "But tell me, dear Mrs. Turner," besought this votary, sinking her voice to a deprecatory alto, "is it a *clean* book?"

Mrs. Willard's giddy mind turned a handspring. "Oh, just *spanking* clean," it crowed. "You could eat off its half titles."

But no. Mrs. Turner was shaking her head.

"No, I'm afraid not—I'm afraid not, my dear. It is really very sad, isn't it, to think of our young people ——"

Mrs. Metz, looking anxiously over the dining room, caught sight of Mrs. Willard and beckoned. "Right over here, Mrs. Willard, if you please."

Mrs. Willard slipped into the seat indicated. A white-haired man with a carefully paternal manner smiled at her as she sat down. "That's very painful for you, my dear—Mrs. Willard, is it?—having that cast to manage. Was it a serious injury? I hope not. I certainly hope not."

"Mrs. Willard will think you very flirtatious, Mr. Parker, calling her 'my dear' on sight," said Mr. Parker's nearest neighbor, a large-toothed heavy woman with a drooping coil of yellow-gray hair braided behind her ears. "You'll need to be on your guard with Mr. Parker, Mrs. Willard; he's a gay caballero, I promise you! I've been a great traveler in my time, and I never ——"

"Now, I won't have you give Mrs. Willard such an impression of our dear Mr. Parker, Mrs. Hanover," interposed the pontifical Mrs. Turner. "Mr. Parker has been known to some of us for a great many years, as the good companion

of a great many happy summers. Indeed, I have often thought—" Mrs. Turner smiled brightly around the group, although a discerning observer might have marked in both her tone and her facial expression a fleeting regret that the room was not yet full—"I have *so* often thought that Mr. Parker may well be regarded by us all as the Dean of the Inn."

A murmur of genteel appreciation, as at a wealthy christening, attended the launching of this memorable epithet, but it was quickly drowned by the louder sound of multiple arrivals. Younger men and women, most of them in hikers' costumes of varying degrees of informality, were streaming in from the duneside trails. Animal cries of satisfaction at sight of the steaming food prevailed immediately over even Mrs. Turner's orotund accents, and Mrs. Willard, who was also very hungry, was able to address herself to her dinner.

It was a good dinner, in excellent country style; fried chicken, cream gravy, mashed potatoes, fresh asparagus, applesauce (this, Mrs. Willard was to learn, was the specialty of the house and appeared at every meal), cherry pie with ice cream, and superb coffee. Directly across from Mrs. Willard a pretty and pregnant Latin brunette, attended by her husband and two other genially shouting male companions and answering apparently to the sole name of Baby, was devouring huge quantities of potatoes and gravy and drinking milk with an abandon little short of historic. "I'm going to have a nice fat child this time or know why," she explained to Mrs. Willard. "They kept me on a diet the first time, and my son—he's nearly two—still looks like an embryo stork."

The men chortled hilariously, and another young woman who had expectations, though none so advanced as Baby's, drew herself together a little and made some comment, obviously disapproving of this frankness, to her husband.

The husband, a solemn, frail, spectacled young man, nodded his entire agreement. Together against the world, they brought to bear upon the oblivious Baby the joint pressure of their wedded disapprobation.

Mrs. Willard, smiling to herself at this optimism, had her attention further caught by a pair of extremely pretty young men a little way down the table, who had seized upon the topic with relish and were now twittering excitedly together about obstetrics. "The agony that girl went through! But the baby was utterly darling," one of them cooed.

Mrs. Willard loved them all. Her content was so vast and all-inclusive that it could not balk at content with any of her fellow creatures; even Mrs. Turner's yearning acolyte, whose name, it appeared, was Mrs. Presley Preston, had charms for Mrs. Willard. She knew too well that as the days went by there would appear a monotony of manner, in other circumstances depressing, in most of her table companions. She knew that the fat man she had met on the stairs would reveal a vocabulary practically limited to the strange and forbidding syllable Urf, with possible meager variations ranging from Glurf through Wurf; that Mrs. Turner would continue to orate and Mrs. Presley Preston to admire; that Mr. Parker would many times acknowledge his deanship with a courtly bow; that Mrs. Hanover would repeatedly proclaim how great a traveler she had been in her time; that Baby and her masculine court would progress endlessly to ever more candid observations, scandalizing with punctual regularity the academic little couple at the end of the table; and that the two delicate young men would twitter without pause, whether of obstetrics or of some other topic. None of it mattered. Peace, perfect peace had settled in upon Mrs. Willard's soul, and the ready friendliness and receptivity against which Charles had warned her so feelingly were already in full possession. She was as much a member of the

goodly company at the inn as though she had been born there.

She rose at length from the table and moved, with several others, toward the front door, looking out into the quiet sunset.

"Chilly for almost June, isn't it?" said Mrs. Hanover, behind her. "I've been a great traveler in my time, and ——"

Prudence constrained Mrs. Willard to seek her own room almost immediately after dinner. Tomorrow, she promised herself, she would venture at least a little way down one of the trails, breathe the sweet woodland air, and satisfy the hunger of her eyes and her heart for beauty. Fundamental beauty, primitive and simple, was what these craved above all: the sight of swift birds flying, the downthrust of roots into the strong black sod. To feel the earth, and not a concrete pavement, under her feet; to walk until she was exhausted and know the blessed rest that follows such exhaustion; to find herself alone in the woods, with no other human creature within sight or sound, and watch the earth astir with that multitudinous and immemorial life that takes no account of the human turmoil squirming like a nest of earthworms on its outer edges. Mrs. Willard acknowledged herself a part of this turmoil; she knew that she could be, and often was, a lusty participant in it; but she knew also, she thought with momentary grimness, when she was in the presence of her superiors.

Turning off her light and watching, from her comfortable bed, the last lights of day disappear and the stars come out above the trees, she thought again, and happily, of Dr. Mac-lane. Strange, she mused, how the mere memory of a few sentences exchanged, a few seconds spent in sudden silent communion, was like the turning on of a dazzling light within her, seeming to reveal all mysteries and yet actually revealing nothing. Moments of high and close communion she had known before, with Virginia and occasionally with

both her children, although never with Charles; yet that had been someway different.

"Someway," however, was as near as she came that night to defining the difference. Her depleted physical resources were unequal to the task of pursuing it further, and sleep, gentle and profound, had overtaken her before the last of the stars came out.

—15—

"You'RE Mrs. Willard, aren't you?" The prim young wife at the end of the table, who, like Mrs. Willard, had come down early to breakfast, laid aside a bundle of pale pink knitting as Mrs. Metz's helper, a pretty, fresh-cheeked girl of fifteen, offered her the cream. "No, thank you, Kathryn, no cream. I'm trying to keep on my diet," she explained to Mrs. Willard, "for—for the baby, you know. And then my doctor says it will be so much easier that way." Unconsciously her eyes sought the place down the table that had been the scene last night of Baby's epic onslaughts upon the gravy. "We're here for the summer; it's my husband's vacation—oh, I haven't told you our name, have I? Hemingway. Mr. and Mrs. Hemingway," she added conscientiously.

Mrs. Willard acknowledged the introduction.

"We're trying to get the most out of the summer," Mrs. Hemingway continued, "before my husband has to go back to his teaching. We thought this would be such a good place for nature study. And we really have learned a great deal already." She reached into her knitting bag and drew out a small black leather notebook. "We've learned fifty-nine different wild flowers—no, fifty-eight. With their scientific names and all."

Mrs. Willard, whose speaking countenance was an annotated commentary of sheer horror at this blasphemy, verbally expressed admiring approval. She must, she told herself sternly, be broad-minded. It was entirely possible that Mrs. Hemingway and her husband liked to botanize; that they were really and truly more interested in cataloguing the wild flowers than in looking at them. Probably, she thought, Mr. Hemingway also chased butterflies with a net. She visualized his solemn satisfaction as he displayed his struggling catch for his lady's admiration. "One of the minor groupings of *Lepidoptera*," he would say modestly, his spectacled eyes shining, "but interesting, my dear, I think?"

"So much better, I always feel, than simply wasting one's time," pursued Mrs. Hemingway with a really vicious glance at Baby's empty chair. "Oh, here comes my husband now. Hello, dear. Mrs. Willard, Mr. Hemingway."

Mr. Hemingway bowed self-consciously and sat down, placing his leather specimen case and his butterfly net on the floor beside him. "Are you, Mrs. Willard, like my dear wife and myself, interested in nature study?"

"I ——" began Mrs. Willard. But at this point Baby and her train, as ebullient as ever, burst into the dining room. Baby was yawning expansively. "Hello," she gave out indiscriminately, patting her open mouth. "What an hour! What an hour! This early rising is going to mark my offspring, I tell you. Mark him indelibly. He'll probably have wattles and a comb. I have the rottenest luck with my young." She smiled brilliantly at Mrs. Willard. "You're looking very well for yourself this morning, aren't you?"

Mr. and Mrs. Hemingway drew together visibly, as though for mutual protection. "Disgusting!" breathed Mrs. Hemingway, seizing her pink knitting and thrusting it out of sight in its bag. Not even by that sacred symbol, it appeared, was she willing to be linked in any fashion with the inexcusable

Baby. She appealed to her husband. "You've nearly finished your breakfast, dear, haven't you? I think I'll just run upstairs and get my—I'll meet you outside, dear."

Mr. Hemingway nodded and patted her hand. "Clara is very sensitive," he explained to Mrs. Willard a few moments later. "She has great delicacy of feeling—a rare quality nowadays." He stared invidiously at Baby, who, in spite of her continued lamentations about the early hour, was attacking bacon and eggs with characteristic zeal.

The others were now trooping in. Mrs. Hanover, haunted even at breakfast by a traveler's reminiscent longings, surveyed the hearty country viands and shook her head, smiling and sighing. "The Continental breakfast—chocolate and a roll, you know—so much more refined." Mrs. Turner, looking a little bleak, and bereft for the time being of her platform manner, refused to be drawn into conversation even by the eager questionings of Mrs. Presley Preston, who fluttered about her like a worried moth about a dying flame. Mr. Parker, after the first elaborate courtesies of greeting, ate his toast meditatively, with a benevolent, remote, and appropriately deanish smile of abstraction. The two dainty young men, who were doubtless, thought Mrs. Willard, daintily breakfasting in their dainty beds, did not appear at all.

Mrs. Willard enjoyed her own breakfast. Her appetite had been thriving even before she had left the hospital, and under the highly vitaminized ministrations of Mrs. Metz she foresaw a quick return of her full strength. Even today she was well enough, she felt sure, to try a walk in the woods. She declined several invitations to include herself in parties already made up, on the plea that her unreliability so soon after her illness would spoil the enjoyment of the others, and lingered in the front room until a quarter of nine, glancing over the morning papers; then she sauntered across the deep veranda, upon which two tables of elderly ladies, to

her round-eyed astonishment, were already embarking upon bridge, and wandered away alone.

The woods, the dunes and the lake, as in their turn she sought them in the next few days, seemed to Mrs. Willard's grateful eyes and reviving spirit the very pleasures of paradise. The beauty that pressed upon her at every turn of the trail, the endless leisure to stand and stare, the solitary hours of peace and introspection, wrought mightily upon her; Charles, Aunt Gertrude, the grocery bill, Miss Mothershead, her detested work at the office, her insignificant role at home—all these quickly began to seem remote and fantastic, the ghoulish patterns of an impossible nightmare. When Richard and Laura came out to see her for the first time she was a changed woman.

"Mother!" gasped Laura. "How did you—why, you look wonderful! How on earth—Mother, here's Joanne. I brought Joanne along. We thought it'd be more fun." She looked anxiously at Mrs. Willard. Richard, who after greeting his mother had fallen suddenly silent, moved away and gazed at the cloudy woods in the far distance.

Mrs. Willard turned to greet Joanne Warburton, Laura's best friend, a pretty, blonde, wistful-looking girl, and suddenly kissed her too. "Why, of course, darling! Come along, the three of you. Luncheon's ready. Are you staying overnight?"

Richard scowled and Laura shook her head. "I guess not. Aunt Gertrude didn't tell us we could."

"Oh," said Mrs. Willard. "Well," she added after a moment, "anyway we've got all afternoon and most of the evening. It doesn't take long to get home."

"She said be there by eleven," Laura replied.

"Well, that gives us quite a while. Lunch first, and then I'll show you my room, and then the three of you can trot off to the woods for an hour or two, if you like, while I

rest—I still have to rest in the afternoon, you know. And I think there's chicken for dinner."

Laura lingered a little behind the other two as they went in to luncheon. "Mother," she murmured, "it was all right to bring Joanne, wasn't it? She paid her own way. I thought it'd be fun to have her out here, where—well, you know how it is at home, Mother, and now that you're not even there ——"

"Of course it's all right." Mrs. Willard's cheeks were slightly flushed. "Bring anyone you like as often as you like, and Richard may too. It'll be fun." The cheeseparing atmosphere at home, she thought indignantly, was having its effect; Laura's timid "She paid her own way" was sufficient evidence of that. Mrs. Willard made a mental note of several agenda connected with the children and laid it aside for her return to Chicago.

The afternoon's program she had outlined to the three young folk was changed in only one detail; Richard, it seemed, had no taste for exploring the woods at present. "Do you sleep when you rest in the afternoon, Mother?" he asked.

"Not usually. Why?"

The boy moved restlessly. "Do you care if I stay here instead of going with the girls, then?"

"Why, no, of course not, dear—I'll be glad to have you." Mrs. Willard looked anxiously at the impassive young face. "Is anything the matter, Richard?"

"The matter? No. Nothing's the matter. Not with me," the boy responded moodily. "I just don't feel like hiking."

"Well, then, come up and talk to me, while I keep my daily tryst with doctors' orders." Mrs. Willard tried to speak lightly, but she was preternaturally responsive to the children's moods—perhaps especially so to those of Richard, who was far less likely than Laura to share them voluntarily with her.

Richard followed her upstairs and sat down, but he seemed

no more disposed to talk than to hike. "It's quiet here," he remarked after a long interval of silence. "Isn't it?" He added the question almost belligerently, in the manner of one accustomed to having his every statement challenged.

"So quiet," agreed Mrs. Willard facetiously, "that you can hear the waiters speaking French in Mrs. Hanover's memory."

Richard did not smile, although she knew he understood her. She had marked him taking note of Mrs. Hanover at luncheon. He inherited his mother's penchant for lopsided observation, and they found each other, ordinarily, excellent company. But today he seemed to want nothing but to sit and stare out of the window. He answered her questions about the household and about the job he had taken in a radio laboratory for the summer, but he volunteered nothing further. Mrs. Willard at last gave it up and relapsed into silence herself—a silence that lasted almost without a break until the return of Laura and Joanne, who burst in, breathless and full of talk about what they had seen and done, at half-past five o'clock.

Seeing her young visitors off at the station, Mrs. Willard knew a temporary return of depression, of rebellion against her lot. "They could just as well have stayed all night," she thought. "Richard would probably have got over whatever it was that ailed him in time to enjoy the woods tomorrow. Charles might have left me a little money." She controlled a slight tendency of her lips to quiver childishly. "It wouldn't have hurt him."

But it was nonsense—worse than nonsense, she told herself as she walked back to the inn, to let this heavenly summer be spoiled by petty grievances and trivial worries. She would write to Charles and state her wishes plainly; and, as for the children, she would steadfastly impress upon them the inevitability of unpleasantness in some form in nearly every day of nearly every human life. The important thing, she

would tell them, is not to be beaten—not ever to be beaten; and if your heart must bleed, to put a basin under it and carry on. What on earth else could anybody do?

Buoyed thus with the bravest concepts and full of hopeful plans, Mrs. Willard rapidly recovered herself to the joy of her summer. Even her troubled past began to reveal aspects of jocosity when considered as a thing done with and discarded. She saw it now as bristling with anecdotal wealth, and among her new companions made cheerful use of it from time to time, masking it discreetly where necessary by the time-tested device of substituting “a friend” for herself as the star of the piece.

With some such disguised account of the memorable bed-spring incident she was regaling Baby at dinner one evening a day or so after the children’s visit when she noticed an unexpected addition to the next table but one. Concluding her story with gusto and inwardly congratulating herself that she had made rather a good thing of it—an impression abundantly confirmed by Baby’s incontinent shrieks of delight—she was arrested in her answering laughter by a well-remembered gaze and found herself looking directly into the attentive countenance and the amused but analytic eyes of Dr. Alexander Maclane.

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HE HAD, he told her after dinner, a shack of his own a few miles down the road, but he had never before visited the inn. “It looked like rain this evening, though,” he said, “and I’d heard of Mrs. Metz’s famous fried chicken and short ribs and asparagus and what not, so, not relishing the idea of waiting until the rain stopped to cook myself some dinner, I drove

over. Anyhow, I was looking for you. Dr. Griffith asked me to have a look at your arm and see if the cast couldn't come off." He scrutinized her flushed cheeks and glowing eyes. "You've made good use of your time; you're looking extraordinarily well already. I hardly recognized you at dinner, when you were telling that very interesting story about your—ah—friend."

Mrs. Willard blushed. "Why do you have to wait until it stops raining to cook your dinner?" she asked to cover her embarrassment.

He took a cigarette case from his pocket, offered it to her, and, as she declined, lighted a cigarette for himself. "My shack's a shack," he explained, "not a cottage or a cabin de luxe. Boards standing upright; cracks half an inch wide. No chimney but the kitchen stovepipe. When it rains, it puts the fire out."

"Dear me," said Mrs. Willard. "Why don't you build yourself a chimney?"

Dr. Maclane looked at her coolly. "Because," he replied succinctly, "I don't want a chimney."

Mrs. Willard was enchanted. "Oh," she sighed, "if I could only answer Charles like that!"

"That's your husband? Why can't you?"

"He's the head of the family," Mrs. Willard said morosely. "He's the father of my children. At least that's what he's always telling me."

"Well, you've probably given him cause to think so," Maclane pointed out reasonably. He hesitated, as though deliberating; then he added, "Care for a stroll down the nearest trail? It's still light enough to pick your way."

Mrs. Willard assented, and they moved off together down the brief stretch of paved road, leaving a mild sensation behind them among the loiterers on the veranda. The sun had set, but a sort of diffused afterglow possessed the open

spaces, and the woods ahead held a clear silvery half-light that was not yet dusk. The threatened rain had been only a sprinkle; here and there, on sloping leaves, bright drops of water rolled and fell musically to the ground. Katydid's were beginning their tireless orchestrations in the trees. At the point where the trail left the road Maclane lifted a swaying branch to let her pass before him, and a faint shower of rain-drops tinkled down. A startled hoptoad sprang from the path and disappeared in the slanted tall grass. Two minutes after leaving the road they had passed out of sight of the inn and were enclosed by the darkening woods. A small winding brook, nearly noiseless, idled companionably along side by side with the winding trail.

"Beautiful here," Maclane said at last, casually. "Chicago—any city's a hell-hole in summer, of course." He scowled. "Don't tire yourself. Let me know when we've gone far enough."

A little farther on there was a rustic wooden bench, perched like a fantastic throne on a small hillock to one side of the trail. Mrs. Willard with a cry of delight immediately climbed up to it and sat down, pleased afresh when she found it a little high for her. "I can swing my feet," she pointed out, demonstrating.

"Do so, by all means." Maclane sat down beside her and reached for his cigarettes. He was a great deal taller than she; even sitting beside him, she found it necessary to look up to him. "June is no time for inhibitions."

The bitterness in his voice, reflected in the tense lines about his mouth as the match flared, startled Mrs. Willard, but the word "inhibitions" reminded her irresistibly of Mr. and Mrs. Hemingway, and she described them at some length and to good effect, winning Maclane to sufficient, if somewhat grudging, appreciation. She could feel the suspended, tentative quality of his gaze upon her even in the gathering dusk.

He liked her, she felt, but would have preferred not to like her; there was something about her that puzzled and interested him against his will. She did not know what it was, nor much care. It was enough to have a companion with whom she need not consider every word before she uttered it, who would not pounce upon her lightest remark and make of it a point of departure for a homily. Mrs. Willard was very happy. Her sense of communion with Maclane, valid and vital even when a silence of some duration fell between them, was as strong as ever.

And long silences were frequent, giving her time to reflect upon the oddity of this communion. Certainly it was an odd source of satisfaction to sit silent with a man who merely sat and smoked, showing no particular pleasure in her society or in anything else. Certainly it was no less odd to feel assured of his friendliness in spite of his moody gaze, his unsmiling rejoinders, or his occasional show of actual bitterness. The mere difference between him and Charles could not, surely, account for it all.

For he was different. Just as, hearing him swear in the corridor outside her hospital room, she had made a note of the difference that may exist between two infuriated men, one of them swearing like an angry cat and the other bursting out of hidden fiery depths like an irascible volcano, so she marked now that his silence differed altogether from Charles' punishing withdrawals. It was as though he fell silent whenever he wished, knowing that she would accept his silence without impatience, even without comment spoken or implied; yet how could he know this, who had known herself for so short a time and at such wide intervals? Mrs. Willard recalled how her husband, wishing to be silent when he was not angry, usually either prefaced or concluded his silence with a formal explanation and apology.

"You're not a bit like Charles," she told Maclane artlessly.

"No?" he replied dryly. "No; probably not. How long is it, did you say, you've been married?"

The question seemed to Mrs. Willard irrelevant. "Eighteen years," she answered in a tone of slight surprise.

He nodded. "I thought so." He did not explain further. "It's getting very dark. We'd better start back. The footing will soon be pretty doubtful."

Mrs. Willard gave her reluctant consent and with his assistance made her way back to the inn. The footing, as he had predicted, was already doubtful; broken sticks lying across the trail and tangled bushes and vines, none of which she had noticed on the way out, seemed to crop up everywhere in the darkness. Repeatedly they stumbled away from each other and together again, and once Mrs. Willard lurched sidewise and would have fallen, perhaps into the brook itself, if he had not caught her and righted her firmly on both feet.

"I'll drive over in the morning to look at the arm," he told her as they gained the main highway. "A splint and a sling will probably do you now. I have all the stuff at the shack—I'll bring it along. Or if you'd like to see the place, I'll take you over there to fix it. About nine-thirty? Right."

A few women and two men were lingering on the veranda as Mrs. Willard approached the inn. "My," said one of the women, "you certainly have a distinguished-looking husband, Mrs. Willard. Did he drive over from Chicago?"

"That was no husband," answered Mrs. Willard blithely. "That was my doctor." She indicated her cast. "He's going to take this off tomorrow morning, perhaps." She nodded amiably and went into the house and upstairs.

Her own words, when a few moments later she stood in her room preparing for early bed, returned to her suddenly like a crash of unheralded thunder. "That was no husband——"

Was Dr. Maclane indeed, she asked herself for the first

time, no husband? Had he a wife? Had he even, perhaps, a large and flourishing family?

Mrs. Willard caught her breath. Her heart, for some inexplicable reason, was jumping about in erratic semicircles, to judge by the way it felt, and her indefatigable imagination, always several lengths ahead of schedule, was officiously at work already, setting up a hypothetical Mrs. Maclane for her inspection. This woman was beautiful—surely unnecessarily beautiful, felt Mrs. Willard, warm with resentment—and chic beyond all reasonable limits; she had long sweeping black lashes, which Mrs. Willard had desired from earliest childhood; and to Dr. Maclane's crackling "No, no, no, no, Christ damn it!" she answered haughtily and crisply, in exasperated accents: "Really, Alec!" . . .

Realizing all at once that in her idiot reverie she had actually spoken these words aloud, Mrs. Willard looked frightened and closed the door. When she turned around again, her startled reflection in the mirror restored her to reason.

"Why on earth shouldn't he be married?" she asked herself impatiently. "You're married yourself. You've been married eighteen years. Haven't you any sense at all?"

She would, she determined, to counteract this narrow-minded tendency to impose celibacy on all the world except herself, write the projected letter to Charles and ask him for some money. She was tired, but not too tired for so trivial an effort.

Her thought of writing, however, was belated; for she found, on looking through her limited effects, that nothing in the form of writing materials—neither pen, pencil, ink, nor paper—emerged. She had made herself ready for bed; she could not seek these articles downstairs; and so, with some slight petulance, she went frustrated to sleep, all her indignant protests still within her.

THE following morning was spectacular with sunshine. Dr. Maclane, driving up before the inn punctually at half-past nine, found Mrs. Willard reading on the veranda, the uncomfortable cast propped uncomfortably in the air. "Well, you'll be glad to get rid of that," he said. "Shall we go?"

Mrs. Willard assented joyously and settled herself in the car with a wriggle of delight, provoking Dr. Maclane's infrequent smile. "You do enjoy things, don't you?"

Mrs. Willard wriggled again, this time in embarrassment. "Is it very far to your shack?" she asked irrelevantly.

"Four miles, perhaps. Not farther." The long car slid easily into motion, and Mrs. Willard, adjusting her cast, settled back with a sigh of satisfaction. "It will be nice to get it off," she admitted. "I've been sleeping with it propped against a pillow, but even that way it's easy to hurt the arm by moving suddenly."

"Give you much pain now?"

"None at all, unless I bump it or twist it."

"You had a bad break there." He turned the car into a shady winding back road. "It may look a bit odd after several weeks in plaster, but don't be alarmed. It'll right itself. There won't be much of a scar, I hope, but there may be a little one. Dr. Griffith tells me he had to compound the fracture."

"Compound it?"

"Open it," explained Dr. Maclane. "He made a small incision at the wrist in order to clean out the bone fragments. It was badly comminuted, you know. Quite a bit of shattering."

"I heard the bones grating together before I lost consciousness," Mrs. Willard recalled.

Maclane nodded. "Unpleasant sensation that."

Mrs. Willard, whose impressionable imagination had just served her with a too-accurate reproduction of the sensation in question, agreed hastily and put it out of her mind by referring to something that had stuck in her memory ever since her accident. "When I was just coming out of the anesthesia," she said, "while I was just barely conscious, I heard Dr. Griffith say to the rest of the operating staff, 'Now be careful what you say.' He went out of the room then. I wondered what he meant."

Dr. Maclane hesitated, knitting his brows in silence for a moment. "No harm in telling you now, I suppose. It seems that at first there was some question of amputation."

"Amputation!" Mrs. Willard turned abruptly white.

"Don't be disturbed. There's no danger now. But it was a bad break." He glanced down at her hands, which she had tightly locked together in her agitation. "I can see how the idea would be a shock to you—aside from the crippling, I mean. You have very pretty hands."

Mrs. Willard glanced at her hands, seeming not to see them. "Oh, I wasn't thinking of that," she managed to say at last, "or of the crippling either. I was thinking of Charles."

"Your husband?"

"Yes. He'd be so angry ——" She caught herself up, her white face suddenly swept with crimson, and looked away from Maclane, who for an instant had turned a glance of utter astonishment upon her. When she looked back, his features had settled into impassivity, though his jaw muscles were taut. "I—I'm a great trial to Charles," she explained, trying to laugh. "He thinks—he thinks I don't take precautions enough. It's really anxiety, I suppose. You know some people

do react like that when an accident happens. I've seen them, even with children ——”

He agreed noncommittally and applied his brake. “Here we are.” He flung open the door on his side of the car and strode around to open the other door for Mrs. Willard. “This is the estate. Injured Manor, my—an acquaintance of mine used to call it.”

The shack, an irresponsible-looking slantwise structure of wide unpainted boards, stood in a thicket of wild plum, its one front window festooned with a luxuriant morning-glory vine. The door swung half open on a worn leather hinge. A thin curl of smoke arose from the rusty stovepipe chimney. Maclane held the door wide and ushered her into the large, disorderly single room. “Sit down, won’t you?”

He removed a dark-red flannel dressing gown, several books, and a brief case from a large, shabby leather chair, and Mrs. Willard, still somewhat shaken at thought of her narrow escape from mutilation and of the insouciance with which she had been disporting herself in her ignorance, sank gratefully into it. “You’ll look at it right away?”

“Right off.” He unearthed a black leather bag and took from it a long bright pair of shears. “Hold it up, this way. No, more to the right. There.”

He cut rapidly and carefully down the cast from end to end; then, laying the shears aside, broke open the plaster with his hands. Mrs. Willard stared in horrified fascination. Her wrist had shrunk to half the size of the other, and the hand attached to it looked as rigid and immobile as a dead bird’s claw.

Dr. Maclane, however, seemed delighted. “Perfect!” he exclaimed in a tone of professional admiration whose sincerity, even to the lay understanding of Mrs. Willard, was unmistakable. “Griffith’s a wizard. Don’t worry about the atrophy; that’ll correct itself. The stiffness will go, too.

Here." He reached for a bottle of oil, anointing his fingers before beginning to massage the wrist. "Look at that tiny scar," he exulted. "You can hardly see it, even now. Doesn't the massage make it feel better?" He worked quickly and eagerly, his strong fingers stroking and pressing the abused flesh with easy skill. For the moment his look of strain, of controlled fury under torture, had completely disappeared, and his eyes were as clear as the eyes of Richard among his radio tubes.

"Much better," Mrs. Willard admitted, relaxing in her chair and giving herself wholly over to the floods of relief that swept through her at the final assurance that her danger had been successfully averted. She thought of Dr. Griffith at this moment almost with worship. Suppose he had given up! She imagined going back to Charles and Aunt Gertrude with her well-established reputation for general incompetence increased and cemented as the loss of a hand would have increased and cemented it, and her heart failed her utterly. She had a rapid and ridiculous series of fantasies in which she successively besought Mrs. Hanover for information as to how she had become so Great a Traveler, inquired of Mr. Hemingway what he knew of butterfly-chasing as a career, and made frantic application to Mr. Parker (or to Mrs. Metz?) for a permanent position as assistant dean of the inn. She laughed hysterically.

Dr. Maclane gave her a sharp glance and laid her injured arm gently down on the arm of her chair while he reached for a small flask on the table behind him. "Here," he ordered, pouring two fingers of brandy into a little glass. "Drink it."

Mrs. Willard obeyed. "I'm all right," she said weakly.

Dr. Maclane, after massaging the wrist a few minutes longer, began to prepare the splint. "Hold your wrist here—no, this way. That's right."

Mrs. Willard, in whom the brandy had induced a state of

dreamy satisfaction, alternately watched his hands at their expert work and glanced interestedly about her. The room was of a casual and masculine bareness; it held a couch, two leather chairs, a clothespress, a couple of small and bulging bookcases, and a small oak table. Through a low doorway, into which, Mrs. Willard felt sure, the doctor could not pass without stooping, a lean-to kitchen was visible, with a small iron cooking stove and a bare pine table.

In one corner of the main room the wall was covered with pencil drawings fastened by thumbtacks to the heavy felt paper. Mrs. Willard, noticing these, stared in dismay. All were caricatures of human faces, men and women, and all, without exception, were savage, leering, vacuous, or mean with incredible cunning. "My goodness," she murmured.

"What?" asked Maclane, not looking up.

"Those drawings. Are any of them people you know?"

"All of them. Why?"

"My goodness," said Mrs. Willard again. "But where *were* you?"

His abrupt laugh startled her. "Here. Wherever you like. Anywhere. It's all the same."

"No," protested Mrs. Willard, shocked. She rose, adjusting the unfamiliar sling, and went to look at them.

"Oh, yes." He came and stood behind her. "Be honest now. Haven't you seen a lot of them before? Don't you see one that looks a little like—well, like your husband, for instance?"

Mrs. Willard's eyes dilated as they met his. "Why—why, they all look a little like him," she whispered.

"Of course they do. Here's one I did yesterday." He picked up a drawing from the table. It was Mrs. Hanover, her Continental graciousness large upon her.

Mrs. Willard laughed reluctantly. In spite of its cruelty the caricature was irresistibly funny. "Poor old soul. You're hard on her. She's stupid, of course, but surely harmless?"

"Stupidity is never harmless." Maclane rummaged in the table drawer for thumbtacks and pinned the picture on the wall. "Stupidity is the unpardonable sin. And the other unpardonable sin, I may add, is making excuses for it, as something tells me you're on the verge of doing." He turned abruptly and carried her discarded cast into the kitchen.

Mrs. Willard, turning from the merciless drawings, had her attention caught by a large framed photograph standing on top of one of the bookcases. It was a child, a boy about seven years old. "Is this one of your patients, Doctor?" she asked as Maclane came back into the room.

His eyes did not follow her gesture. "My son," he replied curtly. He replaced the shears in his bag and snapped it shut.

"Oh." A blankness settled upon Mrs. Willard. "He's a splendid child," she said at last, with effort. "Is he—is it a recent photograph?"

"Three years old." Maclane's dark brows contracted slightly, and this time he turned and looked full at the photograph, the curious strained intentness of his gaze suggesting that he had forced himself to do so. "He's dead," he added a few moments later. "He was killed in a motor accident nearly two years ago. . . . How are you now? Feel steadier?" He reached for the flask. "Like a little more brandy?"

"Oh, no—no, thank you." Mrs. Willard made a hurried gesture of refusal. "Shall we—perhaps we'd better be going back?" The torment in Maclane's eyes was intolerable to her; suddenly she extended her hand. "Doctor, I'm so sorry I spokel"

He looked at her, as though doubtfully hesitating; then he gripped the offered hand, holding it hard for a moment. "Good of you to care."

Alone in her room at Mrs. Metz's that afternoon, Mrs. Willard, much more comfortable so far as her wrist was

concerned but writhing in one of her frequent attacks of self-loathing, congratulated herself wryly that at least she had got home before her nagging uncertainty about Dr. Maclane's hypothetical wife had assailed her; that at least she had been enabled to feel and to express, while he was with her, only her honest sympathy for his grief in the loss of his little son. This sympathy was indeed as true and as hot within her as ever, but accompanying it, for no reason that she was able at this point to justify, there was a conflagration of what, she thought contemptuously, could only be described as common curiosity. The human race, thought Mrs. Willard—for angry as she was with herself she knew better than to suppose herself unique in this respect or in any other—was certainly not worth the trouble it took to keep it going.

As for herself, she concluded disgustedly, Charles had probably been right all along.

—18—

MACLANE's car flashed past the inn early next morning, carrying him back to Chicago. "I'll be able to give Dr. Griffith a splendid report," he had said. "The wrist couldn't be in better shape. In another week or ten days you won't have to wear even a light splint."

Mrs. Willard had longed to ask him whether he would be back, but, although twenty-four hours earlier she would have asked the question with complete lack of embarrassment, she found herself unable to put it to him now, and he vouchsafed no further information of his own accord. A night of fitful sleep had left her fidgety and ill at ease, and a letter from Charles that arrived by the morning post, anticipating

and refusing in one breath, as it were, her request for money, did nothing to improve her state of mind.

"You may possibly have wondered," wrote Charles, "that I did not leave any money with you. I cannot feel, my dear, that under the circumstances we are justified in spending any more than is strictly necessary, and, as all your actual needs are covered by your board, there is probably no opportunity for you to use money without, to state the case plainly, wasting it. This, I am afraid, you are all too prone to do under any circumstances, and especially, I fear, when you have little else to occupy your mind."

Mrs. Willard flapped the page over.

"The children," the letter continued, "are well, though less helpful to Aunt Gertrude than they might be if you had ever thought it worth while to attend to my repeated requests that you train them thoroughly, especially Laura, in household matters. They have a haphazard way of going at their tasks that is all too reminiscent of your own lackadaisical methods." Mrs. Willard turned another page. "Aunt Gertrude and I are also well. We were delightfully entertained at dinner day before yesterday by the head of your department at the office, Miss Mothershead, who inquired very kindly after your health. A letter has come for you with a foreign stamp, presumably from your friend Mrs. Teagarden. I do not like anything you have told me of her, but I am forwarding the letter to you for what it is worth. Your friendship with her is a typical example of the sort of entanglement you characteristically get yourself into. I hope you are bearing in mind my recent warning on that subject. Richard and Laura send their respectful remembrances and Aunt Gertrude her greetings. I am, as always, your affectionate husband, Charles E. Willard."

Mrs. Willard was so diverted at the idea of anyone going to dine with Miss Mothershead—possibly on lightly toasted

pamphlets dealing with Near East relief, followed by lizards in aspic and a goat's-blood highball?—that even the discredited letter with the foreign stamp waited for several minutes under her hand while she enjoyed the imagined spectacle. Virginia's highly spiced communication completely restored her good humor, and she smiled warmly at anxious little Mrs. Hemingway, who immediately pulled up a chair beside her, put on eyeglasses, and set to work on the pink knitting.

"It's growing, isn't it?" said Mrs. Willard encouragingly.

"I beg your pardon?" Mrs. Hemingway looked startled. "Oh. You mean my knitting." She spread it on her lap, looking relieved. "Yes, I'll soon have this sacque finished. Then I'm going to knit a blue one, to be safe."

"Safe?"

"Whether it turns out to be a boy or a girl, you know."

"Oh," said Mrs. Willard, much impressed by this providence. "Then you'll be ready even if it's both," she suggested.

Mrs. Hemingway, startled again, dropped her knitting. "You don't think ——"

"No, of course not," Mrs. Willard reassured her. "That is, I mean the chances are against it." An uncontrollable spirit of mischief took possession of her. "If it were Baby, now ——"

Mrs. Hemingway flushed scarlet. "A *litter* wouldn't surprise me!" she blurted in a venomous undertone. "She's the type that— I don't know how you feel about these things, Mrs. Willard, but I ——"

"Sh!" warned Mrs. Willard.

Baby, her face tinged dismally with green, limped around the corner of the house, alone for once. "Gimme down," she gasped, sinking to the veranda steps and leaning her head against a post. "Oh—oh! That came near being the end of both of us." She wiped her eyes and moaned.

"Both of you?" inquired Mrs. Willard.

"Me and Mortimer, here." Baby patted, very gingerly, her well-rounded abdomen, and Mrs. Hemingway flinched. "I thought I was all through heaving. But not so, my pretties, not so. I've just parted with everything but my immortal soul, as somebody or other aptly put it, and my left little toenail. I suppose," she added judiciously, "I shouldn't have eaten that crabmeat sandwich on top of my breakfast."

"Of course you shouldn't," said Mrs. Willard severely.

"Oh, well. A girl in my delicate condition must have her sustenance. How're you?" Baby suddenly demanded of the tight-lipped Mrs. Hemingway. "Made *your* morning sacrifice to the great god Fertility yet?"

Mrs. Willard, looking apprehensively at Mrs. Hemingway's forbidding expression, leapt into the breach. "Mrs. Hemingway's a good girl who sticks to her diet. She doesn't have to make sacrifices."

Mrs. Hemingway cleared her throat. "I think, Mrs. Willard, if you'll excuse me, I'll just run upstairs and put my knitting away. Mr. Hemingway wants me to go out with him very soon." She crammed the knitting into its bag and left with nervous haste, quickening her step on the way.

Baby scratched her backbone lazily against the corner of the post. Her normal color had returned, and she yawned. "'Mr. Hemingway wants me!'" she mocked, in a mincing exaggeration of Mrs. Hemingway's tone. "That poor gal's definitely afraid of me. Why?"

"You're a terrifying person," Mrs. Willard pointed out. "I'm afraid of you myself." She smiled at Baby. "You know what's the matter with her, of course."

Baby shook her head. "No, I'm damned if I do."

"She's jealous, naturally. You're younger and prettier than she is, and she worships her husband. She's——"

Baby whooped unrestrainedly. "You mean she's afraid I'll make a pass at that little barn owl?"

"Sh!" exclaimed Mrs. Willard. "They're coming downstairs now."

The Hemingways emerged, red of face and with compressed mouths. They bowed stiffly. It was evident that only by keeping a strong grip on themselves could they restrain the impulse to run. Mr. Hemingway deliberately paused, halfway down the walk, and drew from his pocket an unopened packet of cigarettes. "Would you care to smoke, dear?" he inquired, jerking it wide open and offering it to Mrs. Hemingway.

"I believe I will have one," his Clara responded in tones of elaborate indifference. She took a cigarette and put it awkwardly into her mouth. "Light it for me, please, dear."

Mr. Hemingway, after three attempts, struck a match and was about to apply it; then, pausing in time, he whispered: "No, no, Clara! They're cork-tipped. Cork-tipped! You've got the wrong end in your mouth."

Mrs. Willard and Baby, turning their eyes with one accord from the painful spectacle, began to talk rapidly. Mrs. Hemingway, with a sobbing indrawn breath, righted the cigarette and allowed her husband to light it. The couple moved away with a sort of agonized leisureliness. Mrs. Hemingway's hand, lightly holding the glowing cigarette, unconsciously held it as far away from her body as possible.

"God," commented Baby when they were out of hearing. "Can you tie that?"

Mrs. Willard drew a long breath. "Poor things. It's too bad." She sighed and stretched herself in her chair. She had been spared much, she thought, even in spite of Charles and Aunt Gertrude. She had never known this torture, this anguish of self-consciousness that wrought chaos in the tidy mind, that shamed its victims pitilessly before spectators.

Feeling the warm sunshine on her bare arms, so warm indeed that it seemed almost to penetrate the splint and caress the pining flesh within, she remembered Maclane's voice and the hard grip of his hand on hers. She sighed deeply with satisfaction. "It's too bad," she said again.

—19—

HER physical condition improved so rapidly that in no time at all, as it seemed, she was feeling not only much better than she had felt when she arrived at the inn but much better than she had felt in years. She tramped gaily in and out the twisting trails, up and down the dunes and along the many-changing lake day after sun-filled day, sometimes with a companion but more often alone, rejoicing no less in the new conscious strength and endurance of her legs than in the ever-renewed refreshment of her spirit. She grew as honey-tanned and velvety as Baby herself, and her mirror, which for years she had treated with an indifference bordering on contempt, was visited every afternoon by one who looked to her own incredulous eyes almost a total stranger. Charles was the type of husband who, having once signified his admiration by appeal to bell, book, and candle, would have thought it an affront to his taste to admit that any change had occurred or might occur in the object of it. He had often, probably on principle, assured Mrs. Willard that she was "a lovely woman." Indeed, he instructed the children not infrequently to the same effect. "Your mother is a beautiful woman," he would inform them with didactic emphasis. Mrs. Willard had more than once thanked heaven that she could not read the children's minds.

Now, however, she looked forward eagerly to the regular

visits of Richard and Laura for this reason as much as any other, drinking deep of their never-failing admiration and surprise. "You've got the most gorgeous tan I ever saw, Mother," Laura marveled.

Mrs. Willard flushed with pleasure. It was true; she took the sun prettily, turning the color of ripening apricots rather than leather brown or dusty yellow. She laughed and caught a hand of each of the children. "Come along! Come along!" she would cry to cover her confusion; and off they would go together into the woods, she and her tall son and her lissome daughter. Where had they come from? she sometimes wondered in a moment of amazement, feeling herself no older, no more touched of experience than they.

And of a truth the children were difficult to account for, considering Charles. From him indeed, as well as from her, they might have inherited their fine straight bodies, their glowing physical health, for Charles had always, again on principle, taken excellent care of himself; but there was in him no counterpart of the frolicsome spirit of Laura, nor of Richard's rough-edged tenderness. No more was there any such counterpart in herself; Laura and Richard were new and separate beings, complete in themselves and no part of any other. So wonderful they sometimes appeared to her, so winged with the future, that she knew moments when it seemed her heart would burst if she could not break forth in paeans of triumph over them.

But she always sternly repressed this impulse. The future, she told herself out of her bitter experience, is simply the future, no more different from the past than one row of stones piled on top of another. Richard and Laura would live and suffer and grow older, and the golden light that flickered about their youth would vanish like the will-o'-the-wisp it was, while they marked its errant gleaming over children of their own; and so on and on, *ad infinitum*. . . .

The children were with her on the day Dr. Maclane arrived to take the splint off her arm. He looked from them to her in genuine amazement.

"These are not your son and daughter? But they can't be." He looked down at her and suddenly smiled. "How old are you, anyway—eight your last birthday?"

Richard and Laura laughed, and Laura patted her mother's arm. "Eight her next birthday, Doctor," she corrected.

Maclane laughed, looking at the children with a physician's approval of their strength and buoyancy. Richard grinned, moving protectingly nearer to his mother as he had done all his life when he fancied her threatened, even by anything so trivial as a momentary embarrassment. But he liked Maclane, Mrs. Willard could see. His eyes showed it.

"How would you all like to take a run down to my shack?" Maclane suggested. "We'll get the splint off once for all, I hope, and we can go for a drive along the lake afterward, if you like."

Richard and Laura made their pleasure vocal. Mrs. Willard said little. A rush of unbidden joy had assailed her at sight of the doctor's car, and this inexplicable happiness had momentarily confounded her, giving her an appearance of infantile bashfulness that nearly justified his raillery. Mrs. Willard did not actually dig her toe into the sand, but she escaped doing so only by climbing into the car as quickly as possible.

Arrived at the shack, Dr. Maclane at once removed the splint from Mrs. Willard's arm. Both Richard and Laura exclaimed aloud in astonishment at sight of the shrunken wrist.

"Will it really get all right again?" Richard inquired anxiously.

"Oh, yes. In no time," Maclane assured him. He moved back to allow Richard to look at the arm. Richard bent

above it, touching it lightly with a finger. Maclane watched him.

"Would you like to see how it was when she hurt it?" he offered. "Hand me that book in the middle of the third row. No, there."

Richard produced the volume in question, and Maclane turned swiftly to an illustrated page. "There it is. Colles' fracture, it's called. See how the wrist is humped up"—he drew an imaginary corresponding line in the air—"in the shape of a silver fork. The silver-fork deformity—that's what we call it."

Richard followed his continued explanation with deep interest. Mrs. Willard, watching them, suddenly felt for him an aching sense of loss; Richard had been cheated, Richard had been cheated! This was the sort of relation he should have shared with Charles. Thus he should have stood, his eyes on his father's face, interested, respectful, and confident. Thus his father should have spoken to him, sincerely, as one human being to another, taking time, taking thought to interest him. Richard was nearly seventeen years old. Not once in all that time had she witnessed any intercourse between father and son that was not weighted and spoiled by heavily accented authority on the one side and, at best, wordless submission on the other. Yet Richard as a baby had been responsive, pathetically responsive, to his father as to everyone else; a winning, funny baby, affectionate as a puppy until repeated rebuffs had driven him, where Charles was concerned, so far back within himself that he had never got out again.

She recalled the incident of the little rubber toy automobile that Richard had once given Charles for Christmas. The little boy, selecting his own Christmas gifts to his family for the first time, had seized upon the absurd small car as the epitome of all delight, sure that no more enticing present

could be offered his father. Mrs. Willard accordingly had secretly prepared Charles for the gift, explaining at great length and in exhausting detail how important it was that he make a show of being genuinely pleased. Charles, although obviously he understood nothing of her actual meaning, had managed to take the gift, without remonstrance, from the hands of the beaming Richard and to thank him for it. Richard's countenance had been illuminated with an almost angelic joy, and Mrs. Willard had retired from the scene with a sigh of relief—only to return half an hour later and find the child seated formally beside his father on the davenport, listening soberly to a patronizing lecture on the principles of gift selection.

Remembering this episode, she swallowed with difficulty a gathering lump in her throat. How different if Richard had had a father like Alexander Maclane, a man upon whose words he hung with such absorption and in whose quiet tones there was no suggestion of either admonition or patronage.

Maclane offered Richard the book. "Care to look at anything else?"

Richard took it eagerly, thanking him, and established himself near the window while Maclane massaged the injured wrist. Laura watched this operation minutely. "Why do you do that?" she asked.

"To help the skin and the muscles get back to normal," he replied in the same matter-of-fact tone he had used to Richard.

Even Laura, Mrs. Willard reflected, had never had her due from Charles. He had been less stern with her than with Richard, but he had consistently belittled her through her sex, approaching her even in his amiable moods with a pig-tail-pulling jocosity that took no account of her advancing development.

"There!" said Maclane at last, with satisfaction. "It'll be stiff for a while, of course. Massage it yourself when you think of it, and exercise the hand and fingers from time to time. The worst is over."

—20—

IN HER bed that night, after the exhilarating drive and the departure of the children, Mrs. Willard fought off tears for the first time since her coming to the inn. She did not know why she wanted to cry; no doubt, she thought, it was the memory of her children's early wrongs, which was always intolerable to her. Yet there seemed to be something more, something upon which she could lay no fixing finger. So far as Richard and Laura were concerned, the worst, as Dr. Maclane had said of her wrist, was over, and both seemed pointed toward futures as bright as are attained by any. Why, then, weep for the distant past in the light of the hopeful present?

Mrs. Willard did not know, in spite of the thought on which she fell asleep: namely, that not once during all that bright journey had she been left alone, even for a moment, with Alec Maclane. And there was nothing more to be done about her wrist. He might not come again.

This she thought dolefully, and, being inexperienced in medical procedure, deemed it nothing remarkable that he should have come at all and that she had not been requested to return to the hospital for treatment instead. Remembering how Richard had hung on the doctor's words and his admiring comments after the doctor had gone, Mrs. Willard admitted to herself that Maclane had become important to her and that she would miss him. She would regret his loss

as much on the children's account, she told herself, as on her own. To Richard and Laura he would have been like a kind and interested uncle, the elder brother of her own that she had all her life desired.

Filled with these pensive musings, she joined the group downstairs at late breakfast the next day, which was Sunday, and submitted with what grace she could summon to the chorus of exclamations that arose as the breakfasters caught sight of her wrist. The two blossomlike young men looked at each other aghast, blanching, and Mrs. Willard, controlling an impulse to say reassuringly, "There, there—it'll be over in a minute," retired the arm as soon as possible to her lap and changed the subject.

"Yesterday was a glorious day, wasn't it?" she remarked to Mrs. Hanover. "The woods get lovelier by the minute, it seems to me."

Mrs. Hanover inclined her head graciously. "Yes, it's very pleasant here. Very pleasant. Of course in Normandy——"

Mrs. Willard lent only half an ear to the extensive reminiscences of Normandy that followed, for something was going on down the table that interested her much more. The vivacious Baby, looking extremely fetching in spite of her "delicate condition," with her black head tied up in a scarlet kerchief, had deliberately moved to a vacant chair near the Hemingways and was turning upon the unfortunate academician the languishing wide gaze of a fourteen-year-old schoolgirl smitten with hero worship.

"But you really *know* about butterflies, Mr. Hemingway," she was saying at the moment Mrs. Willard noticed what she was up to. "I mean you rank as an expert, don't you? Please tell me all about them. I'm so interested." She sank her delicious creamy chin into her cupped hand and waited, her eyes big and dark with admiration.

Mr. Hemingway's mouth, as he tried to summon a polite

smile, caught halfway several times. His mild blue eyes behind his glasses were as panic-stricken as a hunted fawn's. His face was a dull uneven red. He cleared his throat. "Why, no, I'm scarcely ——" he began.

Baby shook her head at him in tender reproof. "Mr. Hemingway!" she besought him, winningly. "Need you pretend—with *me*?"

Mrs. Willard, almost overcome with inner laughter and yet sharply provoked with Baby—for Clara Hemingway's face was paper white, the pale-yellow freckles standing out like bas-relief—hastened to murmur an appropriate response to Mrs. Hanover, who had left Normandy for the forests and fiords of Norway and was approaching, with the leisureliness required by so reverend a topic, a discourse on the Midnight Sun. Both Mr. Parker and Mrs. Turner were endeavoring from time to time, with small success, to stem this flood of description, Mrs. Turner loyally supported by the unfailing devotion of Mrs. Presley Preston. Mrs. Metz and Kathryn, her little maid, could be seen exchanging significant grimaces in the kitchen.

Mrs. Willard left them to it and sought the veranda and the Sunday papers. Baby came sauntering out after her, well pleased with herself. "Hello there," she called blithely.

Mrs. Willard laid down her paper. "I don't know whether I'm speaking to you or not," she said disapprovingly.

Baby grinned. "At one point," she bragged, "if Mrs. Metz had left a screen off a window, he'd have been out of there like a bat out of hell. Did you see his face?"

"Did you see his wife's?" Mrs. Willard countered sternly.

"Oh, well." Baby shrugged her shoulders. "Do her good. Stir up her hormones."

Mrs. Willard laughed in spite of herself; Baby was so absurdly pretty, so exactly like a mischievous but charming child who knows very well that nobody is going to hold out

against her for more than a few minutes. But this laughter was not countenanced by her conscience. The human sense of fairness, she reflected ruefully, even when it is fairly well developed, is not to be depended upon. The naughty Baby, merely because she was a pretty Baby, would always be forgiven, and the jealous suffering of a Clara Hemingway, spread for all the world to see on a thin freckled face with strained eyes blinking through glasses, would always be matter for laughter. Mrs. Willard detested cruelty—at least, she had always flattered herself that she did—and Baby's cat-and-mouse tactics, she knew very well, should have revolted her.

Baby had sat down in her favorite place on the steps and was leaning against a post, her dark eyes innocent and dreamy, a cigarette smoking lazily in her slim fingers. The sleek and comfortable ease of pregnancy was visibly upon her; her slow, luxurious movements, unconsciously graceful as a kitten's, only enhanced her appealing beauty. Mrs. Willard, who was too much perturbed for silence, steeled herself for further reproof.

"It can become serious, you know, that sort of thing," she ventured.

Baby nodded. "I'll stop short of that."

"How do you know?" Mrs. Willard wanted to say. She took another tack instead. "If you don't watch out," she said lightly, "you may find your own husband getting annoyed."

"Who, Nick?" Baby smiled with superb confidence. "Ha!"

Mrs. Willard admitted to herself that the personable Nick, who obviously knew Baby well enough to take even adequate competition in his stride, was not likely to waste much worry on little Mr. Hemingway. She said nothing more; there was nothing more, indeed, that she could say within the limits of propriety. But she remained uneasy, and her uneasiness was not appreciably lessened by hearing at this moment, from

an upstairs window, a strangled half cry, followed by the smothered reproach, "You didn't have to *look* as if you did!"

Mrs. Willard bent an accusing gaze on the relaxed figure leaning against the pillar. Baby's eyes were half closed; if she had heard anything at all, she gave no sign.

—21—

THE rustic wooden throne beside the brook trail, still enchanting to Mrs. Willard because it was high enough to enable her to swing her feet, was apparently to be left her for her particular delight; although she visited it nearly every day, she never found it occupied. She liked to climb up the hillock and sit there alone, half hypnotized by the idle rippling of the brown brook water over its amber sand and the dappling of sun and shadow as the slanted light fell sifting through the leaves. She often carried a book with her, but she was seldom able to read. Her thoughts, though soothing and pleasant, were inconsequent; she did not often dwell on Charles and the situation at home, Miss Mothershead and the situation at the office, or her marital condition and the situation that would await her on her return to the city. She did not dwell to any great extent even on the children.

Instead, she thought of Baby's beautiful eyes and the complacent satisfaction in the eyes of Baby's husband; of poor Mrs. Hemingway and her obvious torment; of herself, grown miraculously lithe and bright-haired and quick of laughter and unafraid of mirrors; of pretty Kathryn with her apple cheeks and clean white apron; of the delicate young men with their raptures and languors; and most of all of Dr. Maclane—the pain in his eyes at mention of his little son,

the hard set of his jaw muscles when she had betrayed her dread of Charles' anger, his strong nervous fingers on her wrist, his inscrutable eyes across the table, the endless hunger he had put upon her to know more of him than she could glean from outside his life. No thought of them all was clearly formulated; they were rather a series of impressions, chiefly bright and happily tinted, dappled and shifting like the shadows of the leaves themselves. Poetry seemed their natural accompaniment, and when she read at all it was likely to be some breeze-blown rhyme that carried their echo within it:

*It is sad to remember and sorrowful to pray;
Let us laugh and be merry, who have seen today
The last of the cherry and the first of the May;
And neither one will stay.*

None the less, however, these thoughts marked a turning point. Uncertainly and inexpertly, it is true, but unmistakably, Mrs. Willard for the first time in her life was thinking of herself as a woman.

Others, it appeared, were beginning to think of her in a similar fashion. Mr. Parker's courtliness became daily more elaborately frilled and brocaded, his white hair ever more precisely parted; and a gangling youth of seventeen, unknown to Mrs. Willard, who accompanied Richard and Laura on their next visit to the inn, opened his sleepy eyes with frank and flattering astonishment as Richard introduced him.

"Looney Armstrong, Mother. He ——" Richard hesitated; the exigencies of social small talk had always perplexed him. "He came along."

Mrs. Willard offered Looney her hand. "Welcome, Looney," she said, smiling. He looked, she thought, like a half-grown Wyandotte chicken of a more than usually trust-

ful disposition. "I don't believe you've ever been at our house with Richard, have you?"

But it seemed that Looney was Laura's guest, not Richard's. "Just one of the mob," Laura explained airily, her smooth little brown hand light on Looney's arm. "We're going to write a book together: *Rhapsody in an Airplane Hangar* ——"

"—— a *Dissertation on Cinematic Criminology*; or *Half-way Through Life with a Silver Doctor*," Looney contributed. He grinned disarmingly at Mrs. Willard, whose susceptible heart promptly melted within her.

"Dopes," said Richard indulgently, of Looney and Laura. "Do you—are you feeling all right, Mother?"

"Never better. How are things at home?"

Richard shrugged his shoulders. "About as usual." He shifted his position restlessly. "Has Dr. Maclane been here any more, Mother?"

Mrs. Willard shook her head. "Not since the day he took the splint off."

"Mother," Laura announced suddenly, "Richard says he's going to be a neurologist. You know, like Dr. Maclane."

"A neurosurgeon," Richard corrected her. "Do you think I could, Mother?"

"I don't see why not, if ——" Mrs. Willard began, but Laura interrupted.

"Isn't it about lunchtime? I'm starving. Aunt Gertrude got us up so early we've forgotten about breakfast. She had a lot of things for us to do."

Richard grunted. "Yeah. She made me practically peel the back porch." He affected to massage an aching shoulder blade.

"There's the luncheon bell." Mrs. Willard linked her arms in theirs. "You've got here today in time for a long hike. Come along, Looney."

They trooped into the dining room, where Kathryn

beckoned them to places reserved for them. A number of new guests had arrived, and the old residents were making them welcome, introducing themselves with proprietary unction. "Why, there's Dr. Maclane now," Laura suddenly exclaimed. "Isn't it, Mother?"

Mrs. Willard's heart lurched slightly to one side. "Where?" "Third table over that way. By the window."

It was Maclane; he was seated between Baby and the Hemingways. Was this Providence? Mrs. Willard wondered. It would certainly, she thought grimly, be very like Providence as she knew it from long and disheartening experience. It was not that she begrudged Mrs. Hemingway any protection the supreme powers might see fit to bestow, but why, exactly, this form of protection? Mr. Parker would have done just as well.

Mrs. Hemingway's eyes were red and her lips tightly compressed. She spoke as little as possible and only to her husband. Mr. Hemingway had emphasized, in self-defense, his manner of scholarly dignity and aloofness, and he carefully avoided even glancing in Baby's direction.

Maclane, catching Mrs. Willard's brooding eye, raised his hand briefly in greeting, but, being wedged in between the table and the wall, made no attempt to join her party. He seemed, in fact, almost wholly absorbed in watching Looney, who was talking excitedly and without pause to Laura at his side and eating in vast absent-minded gulps.

Richard had nearly forgotten his luncheon in stealing worshipful glances toward the other table. The doctor, intercepting one of these, smiled and greeted the boy with a friendly gesture, and Richard, reddening with pleasure, shyly responded.

Mrs. Willard was at once troubled and tumultuously happy. What was the matter with her? She had never before found herself so difficult to understand; in fact, she had often

thought ruefully that it would be far more comfortable if her understanding of herself were considerably less thoroughgoing. This theory was not standing up well under trial. But at least Maclane was back again.

After luncheon he made his way through the babbling and shouting groups to her side. "How are you? Let's see the arm. Splendid. How are you, Richard? Laura?" He acknowledged Laura's introduction of Looney, shaking hands. "I was wondering," he said, turning to Mrs. Willard, "if you'd care for a drive? The younger generation, I take it, has its own plans for the afternoon?"

Mrs. Willard's conscience smote her for her son, who, she knew, would have preferred five minutes in Maclane's company to a walk over fields of pearl and asphodel. But for the first time in his life she set him aside. "Yes, they're planning a hike," she replied. "I think a drive would be delightful."

Richard, disappointed but loyal, bade her good-by and left her, to join Laura and Looney. Maclane, sauntering beside her out to his car, commented on the strained situation at his table during luncheon. "That young woman—the one with the glasses—was certainly going through hell, or thought she was. I got the impression that she was being systematically baited by that lovely little brat on the other side of me. The one who's rubbing elbows with the stork."

Mrs. Willard was much impressed by this perception. "Tormented," she agreed. There was some resentment in her tone; she had not much cared for his designation of Baby as a lovely little brat. "I think Baby's a menace," she added, trying to speak lightly.

"You can say that again," Maclane corroborated her with vehemence. "That's the type of woman ——"

He did not finish the sentence, in spite of Mrs. Willard's burning curiosity to hear the rest of it, for they had reached the car. "Any special place you'd like to go?"

"Anywhere at all." Mrs. Willard's heart was singing now. The phrase "That's the type of woman," she knew from her experience with Charles (who used it almost exclusively to object to her enthusiastic descriptions of Virginia Teagarden), was more likely to introduce an unfavorable criticism than a compliment; and, although Mrs. Willard herself liked Baby and could not have given any cogent reason why Dr. Maclane should not like her also, she was glad to be able to hope that he did not. Why on earth! she thought dazedly.

Maclane glanced down at her as the car slid around the bend. "I've missed you," he said. "Haunting me, that's what you've been doing."

"But in no hostile spirit," Mrs. Willard assured him demurely.

"About time I got you away from the adolescent influence. That's an absurd boy Laura's attached to herself, by the way."

"I think he's cunning," Mrs. Willard stoutly defended Looney.

"Oh, he is. Rather like a forgetful crane, to look at."

"A chicken," amended Mrs. Willard.

"Well, perhaps a chicken. Anyhow, to go back to this pervasive personality of yours." His tone was equivocal; Mrs. Willard could not tell whether it was mocking or sincere. "All week I've kept wondering, night and day, how Mrs. ——" He broke the sentence off with a characteristic gesture of impatience. "I can't go on calling you Mrs. Willard. It's too utterly damned silly."

"Yes, isn't it?" agreed Mrs. Willard thoughtfully. "My name's Edith."

"Edith. I like it."

Mrs. Willard wriggled contentedly. "I like your name too."

"Alexander? Good God. Why?"

"Dr. Griffith called you Alec. That's nice."

"Oh. Well, I'm open to being called Alec this season or any other." He swung the car to a standstill before a striking vista of blue lake and dark-tipped white dunes. "Is it a bargain—Edith?"

"It's a bargain, Alec."

A musing silence fell between them. Maclane lighted a cigarette. "Edith's a good, candid little name. I like it very much." He tossed the match away. "My wife's name was Julie," he suddenly added.

Was? A lightning arrow of unpardonable joy shot into Mrs. Willard's breast and lodged there, quivering. "She's—is she ——"

He nodded. "She and the boy were killed in the same smashup."

Mrs. Willard cast about in her mind for sympathetic words, but Maclane did not appear to expect them. "Little red-headed hellion," he continued; his hand, holding the cigarette, trembled slightly. "The boy was like her. He had her hair. We called him Sandy." He stared fixedly at the lake. "She killed him," he said, his voice muffled.

Mrs. Willard uttered a stifled cry. "But surely ——"

"Oh, it was an accident—technically. Actually, no. She was in one of her 'tempers'; like most people who go in for tantrums, she was very proud of them." He set his teeth. "She was so furious she couldn't see two inches in front of her; so she put the boy in the car and went for a drive. Women like that—God damn women like that!" He flung away his cigarette and drew a deep breath. "That girl at the table, Baby you called her, reminded me of her, though of course there's no resemblance in looks. Well, it's all in the day's work, I suppose."

"I'm so sorry," Mrs. Willard offered in a small stricken voice.

He put his hand over hers for a moment. "You're a nice

little person," he said with effort. "Shall we drive on and find ourselves another view?"

The moment of painful revelation was safely over. Mrs. Willard, however, breathed no more easily, for a strange thing had happened to her. She had seen a man's face, contorted with pain, settle into lines of calm and reassurance at words of hers, and there surged at once into her consciousness a shout of exultation and the cry of an overpowering need. Her body quaked with the desire to comfort and shield him, to ward off from him the memory of past hurts and the possibility of future ones. If she could turn to him, if she could turn to him and offer him what joy, what peace, or what oblivion there might be for him in her love!

At the word the heart of Mrs. Willard paused in its steadfast beat. She caught one of her hands in the other and held it fast, thus defending herself against betrayal of her plight; for she was drowning, sinking without sound into a midnight tide and rising once and twice—but surely never again!—to the surface of a bright and terrible ocean amid whose thunder and spray her little, gasping cries made no more sound than the breaking of a bubble against a bubble.

—22—

THIS, then, was that mystery upon which she had looked from afar. Mrs. Willard understood now why Virginia had called her a baby and had laughed.

All night she lay wakeful and marveling, yet morning found her entirely unfatigued. She rose at dawn, unable longer to remain in her bed, seeing the pearly sky framed by her open window turn lilac, turn saffron, turn pale green, turn yellow, turn rose. She dressed quietly and slipped out of

the house. The sun was fully up by the time she reached the familiar hillock on the trail beside the brook.

For the first time she did not at once mount to the rustic throne. Instead she stood gazing, her head flung back, an unopened book in her hand. It had rained in the night, and the brilliance of the morning was dazzling. Every leaf in the forest was a separate tongue of green fire, and the steep sky burned above it, an arch of flawless blue. The wind ruffled the trees on a hill in the near distance, and the bright leaves, flashing as they turned, flickered and crackled like a fire in a gale. In the exact center of all this splendor, in the exact center of life and the universe, stood Mrs. Willard and did not know where her transformed self ended and the other glories began. Elsewhere, palely seen outside the flaming circle, were Richard and Laura, children she had known, and Charles, a fussy little man with glasses.

She returned to the inn long after breakfast was over. She accepted a cup of coffee from Mrs. Metz in the kitchen, but she could eat nothing.

"Not feeling bad again, are you, Mrs. Willard?" her hostess inquired solicitously, puzzled by this lack of appetite in one who had hitherto ranked as trencherwoman with the most outstanding.

"Oh, no!" Mrs. Willard smiled radiantly at her. "I'm just not hungry. Did you ever *see* such a morning, Mrs. Metz?"

Mrs. Metz peered unenthusiastically from the window. "'Tis a right pretty day," she conceded. "That's the rain. Rain always sort of brightens things up when the sun comes out again. Can't you even eat a little piece of bacon and some toast?"

"No, really," Mrs. Willard repeated. "I'm not hungry. Thank you just the same, Mrs. Metz." She drank the last of her coffee.

"Hi there." Baby, gotten up with bland disregard of the

conventions in large blue overalls and a red plaid shirt, hailed her from the dining-room door. "What are you up to, eating in the kitchen? Where were you at eight o'clock this morning?"

"Don't you wish you knew?" Mrs. Willard countered lightly. She tightened her fingers on the handle of her cup; in another half minute, she felt, she would yield to her insane impulse to shout wildly, "Baby, Baby, what do you think? I'm in love!" And indeed, though she succeeded in controlling this specific impulse, her quick color betrayed her, and at Baby's instantly knowing expression she laughed irrepressibly. Mrs. Metz had gone upstairs to help Kathryn with the morning work, and Baby, with a cautious look about, seated herself astride a kitchen chair and bent upon the glowing countenance before her the look of one from whom it is useless to attempt to conceal.

"I'll be damned," she said mildly. "Well, well. Bless its little heart. Tell Mamma all about it."

Mrs. Willard laughed again. "No."

"No? Is that nice?" Baby meditatively ate a scrap of bacon from a platter on the sink. "Well, if you won't, you won't. Just so you lay off my butterfly-chaser."

"Baby ——" Mrs. Willard began. The thought of Clara Hemingway's unhappiness, of anyone's unhappiness, on this supernal morning was not to be borne. "You will be careful, won't you?"

"Says the pot to the kettle," Baby mocked. "Well, I'm off. Going riding with Nick."

Mrs. Willard was not too bedazzled by love to be startled at this. "Riding! On a horse?"

"Certainly, on a horse. The unborn child doesn't live that can bully me." Baby stood up and adjusted her overalls. "As long as Mortimer here isn't making any more of a con-

tribution to family life than he is at present, he'll go where Mother goes and like it. Care to come along?"

Mrs. Willard shook her head. "I have to write letters."

"Says you." Baby flipped a lettuce leaf at her and departed.

Mrs. Willard was glad to get rid of her. The encounter had shown her that she had need of taking thought, lest her inner illumination betray her secret to the world. She went to her room and confronted herself in the mirror. At sight of the parted lips and shining eyes that met her there she actually started back; why, how could she hope to conceal it? She had a swift backward vision; she saw a weary, discouraged young woman standing beside her husband's bed, saying with apathetic bleakness, "There's only enough food left for two more days, Charles ——"

She had felt then like a woman whose life was done. And look at her now.

She sat down on the side of her bed and tried to collect her thoughts. But she had no thoughts, actually, except of Alec. There was more meaning for her in one remembered movement of his hand, in one change of expression on his face, than in anything on earth besides. She was lost in him.

She was lost, too, in the immediate present. The past and the future alike were empty and voiceless. Once in a while it seemed to her that she heard, dim in the distance, the clamor and call of matters she had once known to be important. Now, hearing them, she remembered Alec and forgot them.

She did not even ask herself whether he returned or might return her love. She did not think of what her love implied either for Charles or for the children. As yet she had small need of anything beyond this all-compelling ecstasy of realization; indeed, she could not at this point have borne much more. To have found love; to have found Alec; that was all,

and it was more than everything. The straining uprush of outgoing love, surging through her afresh at every thought of him, filled consciousness to overflowing; memory and foresight were all but lost within it. Memory, it is true, flung out here and there some flaming signal—the blood-red moon above the lake, her moved voice crying out, “Virginia, Virginia, if ever anything lovely comes into my life, I won’t turn my back on it. No matter what it is. No matter what it leads to.”

“No matter what it is. No matter what it leads to,” Mrs. Willard now repeated, the mystical quality of the words as she spoke them aloud seeming to flood the room with radiance. “No matter what it leads to. . . .”

The luncheon bell broke through her reverie, almost, it seemed to her, before she had spent five minutes in her room. She made her starry-eyed way downstairs and sat through the meal in a half trance, somehow hearing what was said to her, somehow responding. She was dimly conscious of something amiss, and on the arrival of dessert she awoke abruptly to a disturbing realization.

Neither Baby nor the Hemingways had come to luncheon.

Mrs. Willard was alarmed. She knew instantly and with certainty that this was no coincidence. Baby had gone for a ride and the Hemingways had gone for a walk; but somehow, somewhere, they had met, and Baby—Mrs. Willard knew it as though she had seen it—Baby had done harm.

The arrival at this moment of Baby’s husband, alone and apparently occupied with some diverting thought, but confirmed this disastrous impression. The imperturbable Nick was smiling. “Little devil!” his expression said as plainly as words.

Mrs. Willard pushed back her chair and went out to the veranda. Baby was nowhere in sight. Neither were the

Hemingways. But Alec Maclane's car, with Alec at the wheel, was just coming to a halt at the front gate.

He caught sight of her at once and waved his hand before opening the door and disembarking. "I carried off your sun glasses yesterday," he said, pulling them out of a pocket. "Thought I'd bring them out. Thought you might want them."

Mrs. Willard took the glasses. "You came all the way out here for that!"

Maclane laughed; a slight flush appeared about his temples. "Well, no. I may as well own up. I wanted to see you again. Talking with you yesterday seemed to—I don't know. Last night was the first time I've ever been able to get away from—from thinking about the boy, you know. So I said to myself, 'Edith did that. Let's go out and tell her thank you.' " He smiled a little wryly. " 'Tell her thank you' was Sandy's phrase. Day before yesterday I couldn't have used it."

Mrs. Willard did not speak; she could not.

"I can't stay," Maclane continued. "I've got a consultation at four-thirty. Let's sit here on the lawn for half an hour, shall we?" He pulled two chairs into the shade of an overhanging elm. "Here comes your flirtatious little friend, looking as though she's made a killing."

Baby was approaching around the corner of the house. Mrs. Willard's alarm returned in full force; for a moment she forgot even Alec. Baby, catching sight of her, made toward the elm with gestures of revelation as of something too good to keep. "Wait till I tell you!" she exclaimed as soon as she was within hearing. "But off the record, remember, strictly. Even Nick might think this was trying him a bit too high. The Boy Naturalist kissed me. Kissed me!" She went off into a gale of laughter. "Not badly, either. I was definitely surprised." She untied the red ribbon on her black curls and tied it again. "We ran across them on one of the side trails,

and I sent Nick home with the horses and joined them for a lesson in botany. So much better, I always think, than simply wasting one's time," she impishly quoted Mrs. Hemingway. "Anyhow, Little Burbank had a new specimen of Jimson weed or something equally thrilling, and I asked him to tell me all its shy secrets ——"

Mrs. Willard interrupted her. "Did his wife ——"

"She turned around just in time to See All. She had his butterfly net in her hand, and just then a big butterfly whammed right into it. You never heard such a screech in your life. You'd have thought it was a Bengal tiger, the way she threw the net down and high-tailed it into the woods. He went right after her like a little man, I'll say that for him. He turned around and gave me one look and said, 'You!' like an ancient Hebrew prophet admonishing a what-have-you, and ran like hell after her. That's all there is. There isn't any more."

"Where is she now?" demanded Mrs. Willard.

"Both of 'em are upstairs. They came in the back way; we all did. I wonder if Mrs. Metz has anything left from luncheon. I could eat a porcupine. What's that?"

A commotion had arisen on the veranda; voices uplifted confusedly in a terrified babble, and one hoarse voice above the rest: "Come—somebody come—for God's sake help me—my wife—my wife!"

Maclane leapt to his feet and ran toward the house. Mrs. Willard followed him. "Let him through; he's a doctor," she cried as they reached the excited guests. "Where is she, Mr. Hemingway?"

Hemingway's gray lips jerked. "Bathroom," he answered huskily.

Maclane started up the stairs, and the crowd surged after him. "Keep back, all of you, please!" he ordered. "Mrs. Willard, will you come? I may need help. Mrs. Metz, you too,

please. No more." He took the stairs three at a time, the two women following him. "Where's the bathroom, Mrs. Metz? Oh. I see. Well!" He drew a long breath. "Not so bad but it might be worse."

The piteous Clara sat slumped on a dressing stool beside the tub, her wrists, both covered with blood and still bleeding, extended over it. She was shuddering and weeping; her face was pulpy with tears, and her eyes were swollen shut. She gave no sign of knowing that anyone had come. A stained safety-razor blade and a few scattered flecks of blood were on the linoleum beside her, and the front of her dress was spattered.

Maclane sponged the bleeding wrists gently, revealing a crisscross pattern of threadlike gashes on each. "Have you any bandages, Mrs. Metz? There are some out in my car, though, anyway. Please ask Kathryn to bring my bag." He raised his voice, for the benefit of the listening crowd at the foot of the stairs: "Now, Mrs. Hemingway, there's nothing to be alarmed about. You'll be quite all right. But you've no business to be crawling through barbed-wire fences just now, you know. You take it easy from now on. This outdoor business can be overdone."

Mrs. Metz, who had herself gone for the doctor's bag, now returned with it. He took it from her and busied himself briefly with its contents. "I was just telling Mrs. Hemingway, Mrs. Metz, that she must stay away from gullies and barbed wire for the rest of the summer," he said with a significant glance. "You keep an eye on her for me, will you?"

Mrs. Metz took her cue promptly. "I certainly will, Doctor. Is it all right if I tell the folks what happened?"

"Certainly. Tell them Mrs. Hemingway had a slight accident in getting through a barbed-wire fence. She's torn her forearms a bit, but the injury's not serious. And ask Mr.

Hemingway to come up. Where is he, by the way? Not ——”

“He’s out in the kitchen, Doctor,” Mrs. Metz assured him. “There’s nobody else there but Kathryn. I told her to give him a glass of peach brandy; it’s all I’ve got on hand.”

“Well, send him up—the sooner the better,” said Mac-lane. He finished bandaging the second wrist, deliberately carrying the bandage all the way to the elbow, and, picking up the razor blade, looked about him for a place to put it.

“I’ll take it,” said Mrs. Willard. It was the first time she had spoken.

He gave it to her without question. “Now, Mrs. Hemingway, you’d better lie down for a while. Here’s your husband to take care of you. Stay in bed the rest of the day and have Kathryn bring you your dinner. And remember”—he raised his voice again—“no more barbed wire.”

Mrs. Willard, having discreetly disposed of the razor blade and left Mrs. Metz putting the bathroom to rights, made haste to join Maclane on the veranda. He was still answering questions, courteously but with obvious impatience, and he hailed her approach with relief. “Walk out to the car with me, won’t you?” he said. “There’s something I’d like you to do for Mrs. Hemingway, if you will.”

He drew her away from the adhesive crowd of still excited guests. “Well,” he said ruefully, “there went our half-hour and more. I’ll have to leave at once.”

Mrs. Willard drew a long breath. “I’m so glad you were here. We couldn’t have got a doctor in time.”

“In time?” Maclane laughed harshly. “My dearest girl, there wasn’t the slightest danger.”

“There wasn’t?” Mrs. Willard, taken aback scarcely less by this unexpected announcement than by his apparently unconscious designation of her as “my dearest girl,” stopped short in her tracks. “But she’d slashed her wrists!”

"To about the depth," he stated succinctly, "of a good medium hair's breadth."

"Then she wasn't—she didn't really try to ——"

"To kill herself? Oh, yes, I think she did. She's not the type to put on an act. She just didn't have the nerve to cut deep enough, when it came to the point. I hope my story got across. Mrs. Metz is in for some disagreeable and absolutely unjust publicity if it didn't. Not to speak of the poor girl herself. It would be pretty embarrassing for her."

Mrs. Willard agreed. "You—your presence of mind ——"

He shrugged this aside. "Could you do anything, do you suppose, to curtail the activities of what's-her-damned-name—Baby—in that direction?"

"I did try." Mrs. Willard looked troubled. "She wouldn't listen. I—I don't think she means any harm."

"That's the hell of it," said Maclane grimly. "Neither did Julie." His face revealed intense strain; the incident, doubtless because of his swift association of it with episodes of his own past, and particularly with the ultimate tragic episode of his son's death, had penetrated well below his thin defenses. His jaw muscles twitched, but he made an effort to bring the conversation back to lightness. "That's a damned shame about our half-hour. I'd looked forward to it. You're a memorable sort of person; one comes back for more. Why, what's the matter? Edith! What's the matter?"

Mrs. Willard had begun to tremble violently. The reaction from shock and surprise, together with the sudden and unaccustomed tenderness in Maclane's voice, shook her from head to foot; tears brimmed up in her eyes. "I think I'm going to have hysterics, Alec," she whispered.

He put his hand over hers in the familiar clasp she loved. "No, you aren't. Not now. Not before all those assembled harpies on the porch. Chin up, now. Doctor's orders."

He cupped his fingers under her chin and lifted her face

so that her eyes met his. "Bit of a darling, aren't you?" he said. "Worrying about other people's troubles. Apologizing for that brat Baby. Threatening me with hysterics because Mrs. Hemingway scratches herself. If that's the way you take care of people, I hope there's a vacant room for me in your heart."

"You are my heart," said Mrs. Willard.

—23—

WHEN he had gone she stood motionless for a time, recalling with mounting ecstasy how his face at her words had changed like water under a darkening wind; hearing again and again the strangled, unidentifiable word that seemed literally torn from him; seeing his knuckles turn white on the wheel as, with a despairing glance toward the veranda, he prepared to drive away. "I'll see you Sunday," he promised her. The engine's roar arose, died down, and was gone.

Turning at last toward the house and noting in spite of her inner tumult the curious glances of the guests on the porch, she was conscious of brief thanksgiving that at least their attention was divided between her and Mrs. Hemingway. She passed through the crowd, evading their hinted questions as best she might, and made her way sedately up the stairs, though all her impulse was to run and run, far into the woods, miles away from everybody and everything but solitude and silence and the fragrant breath of the forest.

She locked her door behind her. "I can't bear it," she whispered. "I—can't bear it. It's too much. I must do something, I must do something!" She ran her shaking hand along her little shelf of books and selected one at random.

But it was useless to try to read. Useless to try to sit still. She was daft with happiness.

To be out in the woods—to be alone on the brookside trail! She crossed to the mirror; no, she could not show that illuminated face downstairs again so soon. She lay down on the smooth bed and, clasping her hands behind her head, gave herself wholly over to the upsurging memories and the flooding ecstasies of sensation that accompanied them.

There came a tap at the door. Hurriedly she sat up and pushed the waves of her hair into something like order. "Come in," she called, and then remembered that she had locked the door. "Just a minute," she added.

The visitor was Baby. It was at once apparent that the Hemingway episode had not left Baby unmoved; there was a look of tension about her mouth, and the face beneath the expert make-up was haggard.

"Baby? Come in," said Mrs. Willard.

Baby entered and sat down, saying nothing for several minutes. Then she made a little gesture with her head toward the Hemingways' room down the hall.

"She all right?" The liquid dark eyes held desperate appeal. "She going to get over it?"

"I believe so," Mrs. Willard answered as coolly as she could.

Baby shivered and relaxed a little. "I suppose it was a kind of a lousy trick," she admitted, lowering her lashes and running a nervous finger up and down along a seam of her overalls. "She asked for it, though—practically gathering her skirts around her every time she looked at me. But of course," Baby conceded with artless vanity, "she didn't have much of a show against me if I wanted to do anything about it; it was kind of like tormenting a field mouse or something." She twitched uncomfortably. "I wish I hadn't

done it." She looked with pathetic expectancy at Mrs. Willard. "I suppose there's nothing I can do about it now?"

"I'm afraid not," Mrs. Willard agreed. "You'd only embarrass her more than ever."

Baby nodded moodily. "That's what I thought." She was silent for a moment, evidently turning over in her mind something she wanted to say. "You—you're mad at me, aren't you?" she asked timidly, like a child.

This was too much for Mrs. Willard. She laughed in spite of herself.

Baby tried to laugh too, but cried instead; two enormous tears appeared on her cheeks, and Mrs. Willard suddenly hugged her. "No, Baby, no. I'm not mad at you. I'm not mad at anybody."

Baby put a hard little hand over the arm that lay across her shoulder and squeezed it. "Well," she said at last, "I'd better be getting out of here before I do any more damage. My mother says Hugh—that's my boy—has a rash. Nothing serious, she thinks, but I thought I'd go home and look him over. Nick's ready to go, and I owe it to the Hemingway gal not to spoil her whole summer, if I haven't already."

"You're leaving at once?"

"Well, that's what I wanted to ask you." Baby pleaded the knee of her overalls. "Would it be any good—I mean, would it help on the barbed-wire story—if I stuck around a day or two? I mean, if I leave today Mrs. Hanover will tell everybody I remind her of a good-looking chippy she once saw in Naples or Nome or somewhere, and she'd like to know just how much I had to do with poor Mrs. Hemingway's 'accident.' You know what I mean."

"Yes," said Mrs. Willard.

"Well, what do you think? Shall I stick it out a day or two?"

"It might help," Mrs. Willard decided, "if you're sure your little boy doesn't need you."

"Oh, no. Hugh's all right. Mamma'd be sending telegrams every five minutes if he had anything serious. I'm just sort of lonesome for the little dope. But I'll wait until day after tomorrow, if you think ——"

Mrs. Willard nodded slowly. "Mrs. Hemingway will probably stay in her room most of the time till then. I do think it would help, Baby."

"All right. I'll stay." Baby looked relieved. "That was a smart story your doctor friend cooked up on the spur of the moment."

"Yes, I thought so." Mrs. Willard turned away and adjusted the window shade.

"Looks like a good guy," Baby proceeded warily. "Even if he does hate my gizzard," she added.

"He doesn't."

"He does so. Baby knows." Baby was recovering rapidly; a little of her natural impudence had returned, and there was color in her cheek. "I've never met your husband, have I? He hasn't been out, has he?"

"He's busy," Mrs. Willard returned curtly.

Baby, nobody's fool, slapped her own cheek and rose. "O.K.," she said, moving toward the door. But, once outside, she put her head back in. "Too busy, if you ask me," she appended.

"I didn't ask you," Mrs. Willard pointed out.

"That's right, you didn't." Baby still lingered with her hand on the doorknob. "Well, anyhow, while I've got my hair down, I'd like—I mean—well, good luck and all that sort of thing. I think you're swell. I think your kids are swell. I think your doctor's swell." She half closed the door but made one more appearance. "Ever since the day you came, and especially since I've seen the kids, I've been ask-

ing myself, 'What's wrong with this picture?' I mean it must be your husband, because it isn't anything else. Well, good luck. I'll see you again before I go, of course."

Mrs. Willard locked the door behind her and returned to the bed. Instantly, as the sound of Baby's voice died away, she was back beside Alec at the gate, hearing his voice, seeing that change in his face—Mrs. Willard closed her eyes and her hands at thought of the change, and of his promise to return on Sunday. It was not the children's week end, she realized with bliss. Richard and Laura would not come out for another whole week.

Baby's references to Charles had sounded no disturbing note in her happiness. Mrs. Willard thought of her husband at this point with Gargantuan amusement, a sort of gleeful and all-embracing triumph. Here was something he could not take from her. Here was something that neither he nor Aunt Gertrude could touch. Her personal feeling toward Charles, at the same time, was paradoxically softened. With immense good humor and good will she wished him well, heartily wished him well, in all his goings and his comings, his downittings and his upittings. She had not felt so cordial toward him in years.

She had not in all her life, indeed, felt so cordial toward all the world. She was able to achieve—not love, to be sure—but pity, at least, even for Aunt Gertrude; even for Miss Mothershead, who from any such happiness as this must surely be forever shut out. Mrs. Willard remembered gratefully all that her mirror had shown her of smooth bright hair, glowing eyes, round slender arms, sensitive lips and hands. Newly dear to herself because she was Alec's, she thought with compassion of all women he did not desire. Neither he nor any other man, she was sure, could desire Miss Mothershead, who, in spite of Aunt Gertrude's repeated asseverations that Althea was "a fine-looking girl as

well as a brilliant one," had continued to remind Mrs. Willard of one of the fetal monsters in her scientific dictionary, disastrously grown to adult size and requiring for completion of her destiny only a display jar, a fixing solution of formaldehyde, and a red label reading *Poison*.

Now, however, and for the first time, this destiny seemed to Mrs. Willard wretched rather than hateful. "Poor thing," she thought, stretching herself and turning on her pillow for the sheer luxury of realizing afresh the singing life in her veins. "Poor, miserable, half-dead creature. . . ."

—24—

CLARA HEMINGWAY did not appear in the dining room, or indeed outside her own room, for more than two days. Mrs. Willard meditated on the possibility of visiting her there but decided against it. Clara, she reflected, would need time and painfully gathered strength to reconcile herself to the relentless malice of fate. No stranger herself to defeat and humiliation, Mrs. Willard knew only too well the guise in which fate now appeared to her shamed and cowering neighbor: a huge, shapeless laughter that had tempted her to self-destruction and roared again with malevolent glee to mark how cravenly, how grotesquely she had bungled it.

The whole affair had for Mrs. Willard a shuddering familiarity, as if trailing wisps of that cosmic derision clung to her as she passed by. In her new enchantment she could not bear the suggestion, implicit in both the Hemingway incident and her own past experience, that she was but recessed from pain.

She had not expected Alec until Sunday afternoon, or the Sunday luncheon hour at the earliest. But he came to

her in midmorning, surprising her on the hillock beside the stream, the book she had brought with her for form's sake lying idle under her hand. She heard the brushing aside of a branch and turned quickly.

"Alec!" She sprang to her feet, the book dropping to the ground. "You—you startled me," she stammered.

He took her in his arms, kissing her hungrily, and she clung to him in a trancelike silence. There were tears on her cheeks, but she smiled. She could not speak. His eyes, strangely darkened as he set her away from him, rested on her face for a long moment.

"My God," he breathed, his hands gripping her shoulders. "Edith. Kiss me again."

In his arms she found her voice at last, but only to cry his name. "Alec! Alec!" she whispered over and over again.

He murmured against her hair. "Let's sit down, shall we?"

They made their way, his arm about her, to the top of the hillock. Neither spoke for some moments. Mrs. Willard was far too happy to speak of her own accord. What had lain hidden all the fretted years was clear and palpable now as a jewel in the hand. This was love, and this was she, and at last they had come together.

"Well ——" the man said at last, "here we are. What are we going to do about it?"

Mrs. Willard looked up at him, surprised. "I think we're doing beautifully," she said.

Maclane laughed. "So do I. But I mean ultimately."

"Ultimately?"

"About the rest of the people in our lives, you know. Particularly yours. Your husband, for instance."

"Charles?"

"Charles."

Mrs. Willard made a little gesture of distaste. "Let's not talk about Charles. Need we?"

"Well ——" Maclane hesitated. "Not just now, if you'd rather not. But some time we'll have to. So why not get it over?"

Mrs. Willard was silent.

"I'm afraid you'll have to divorce Charles, you know."

"Divorce him! Divorce Charles!" Mrs. Willard had a swift vision of Charles at the bare suggestion drawing himself to his full height and ordering her out into a snowstorm. "Why, he wouldn't let me!"

"Don't be goofy, dearest. As nearly as I can make out, you've got grounds for at least a dozen divorces."

"But Charles——" Mrs. Willard paused to accustom herself to this cataclysmic idea. "But Charles——" she tried again. "But I'm married to him!" she insisted, still unable to cope with the new concept.

"And have been, I should say, for about eighteen years too long." Maclane's defenses were going up; he looked at her almost with doubt. "Of course, if you just want to have your cake and eat it too—I'm sorry, Edith, I don't mean that. But you can't marry me, you know, until you stop being married to him."

"Marry you?" Mrs. Willard had not yet had time to dissociate her concept of marriage from its eighteen-year-old connotations. "Surely we don't have to get married," she objected disapprovingly.

Maclane, for the first time since she had known him, gave a sudden shout of laughter. "That from you! Suggesting that we live in sin!"

"I wasn't suggesting anything of the kind," Mrs. Willard retorted with dignity. "I was only ——"

He kissed her, still laughing. "I know you weren't, idiot.

What you really want to know is why we can't just go on the way we are. Isn't it?"

Mrs. Willard, a little piqued by his amusement, did not speak, since this was beyond all possible denial exactly what she had meant.

"Come now, grow up. I want you for a wife, not a pet." He laughed again. "You don't happen to have a miniature of Charles about you, do you?"

"A miniature?"

"I think he might be worth looking at," Maclane explained. "Or even worth stuffing, maybe." He tightened his arm about her shoulders. "You don't realize," he said, "because Charles has never taught you to realize, what it is to be really married. If it weren't that you've been cheated all this hell of a long time, I could almost thank him for it; he's left it for me to show you." He drew her hand along his cheek. "But anyhow, we can't just go on like this; we're not seventeen years old, Edith. You'll see why yourself, in a little while; you'll come to feel very differently. And you've wasted enough of your life. I'd take you on any terms, of course, if you'd have me. But I want to marry you. I believe in you; I trust you. God knows why, but I do. You can't let me down now."

Mrs. Willard did not speak.

"It's been too sudden for you, that's all. It's bowled me over too. I never thought—I never expected—ah, Edith!"

"Alec," she whispered, hiding her face on his coat.

He pressed her close, with a reassuring and brotherly tenderness. "You think it over, Edith. You'll come to me. I'll not bother you with it again until you've had time to get used to it. See, you've dropped your book—what is it?" He stooped and picked it up. "Poetry. Well, it's a moment for poetry, I agree." He smiled at her.

A rich silence surged round them. Now and then one or

the other spoke or murmured inconsequently; there was no need of speech to complete the hour and their communion. The dazzling sun climbed to middle height, and the distant clang of Mrs. Metz's luncheon bell sounded briefly and was still.

"I suppose we'd better show up?" Maclane suggested.

"Oh, yes." Mrs. Willard pushed back her hair and tried to pin it, her hand shaking. "Here, let me," Maclane said. "This way? Wait a minute." He dipped a corner of his handkerchief into the brook and sponged away the sudden tears that showed along her lashes. "Edith, you are—happy? I've not offended you, or spoiled anything for you?"

She smiled and caught up his hand to her cheek.

"Then that's all that matters. The rest will keep. Ah, Edith, you're so sweet. You're so damned sweet!"

They set off toward the inn. "How is that poor girl that hurt herself last week?" the man inquired.

"Mrs. Hemingway? She seems better." They moved slowly up the trail. "Baby's gone. She went home three days ago."

"Well, that's good, anyway. That one was a limb of Satan if ever I saw one. What does her husband think of her kididoes?"

"He doesn't seem to be much worried."

"He probably beats her regularly, and she knows just how far she can go," Alec suggested. For the first time there was actual gaiety in his voice; he was lightheaded with happiness, as Mrs. Willard had been before.

"Sh!" she suddenly warned him. "The Hemingways are behind us."

Mr. and Mrs. Hemingway had emerged from a side trail a short distance back. They were plodding silently along, neither speaking to the other, apparently. Their faces drooped, their gait was dispirited and gloomy. Clara made much of her bandages, carrying her arms affectedly.

"Hello," Mrs. Willard called.

The Hemingways responded. Mr. Hemingway, seeing the doctor, cleared his throat and spoke, with effort. "I haven't had a chance to thank you, Doctor, for what you did for Mrs. Hemingway. Not only the treatment, you know, but—ah—your consideration. Your very great consideration."

"Quite all right," Maclane dismissed it. "How are you, Mrs. Hemingway?"

"I'm very well, thank you," Clara said primly. "Dear, we must hurry. I have to attend to ——" She urged her husband on; moving ahead of Maclane and Mrs. Willard with an indistinctly muttered apology, they all but ran toward the inn.

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MRS. WILLARD took Alec's promise at its face value. She was in no mood for decisions, or indeed for anything but joy. There was a new eagerness in Maclane's eyes every time she welcomed him, as though even yet he were surprised to find that he loved her, and this moved her more strongly than had anything in her experience. She knew instinctively that it was his own love, not hers, that perpetually astonished him, that occasionally even now stabbed him with bitter and dismaying uncertainty. Sometimes his distrust—not of her, apparently, but of life itself as a thing to build anything as ephemeral as hopes upon—forced itself from him, as when he had half accused her, that day by the brook, of wanting to have her cake and eat it too.

To his occasional outbursts, however, she opposed nothing but silence and trusting affection, and gradually the guards he had set about himself were lowered. His tenderness toward Mrs. Willard herself seemed to her a continual miracle.

"You're so good to me," she would say gratefully as, driving over the smooth highways in the summer dusk, while the great dunes divided and fled before the wheel, or standing by day in the sun-spattered woods, well out of sight of road or inn, she realized anew the gentleness and justice of his attitude toward her. Charles, she thought repeatedly, could never have treated any woman as Alec treated her. Basically, whatever his protestations concerning the sacredness of womanhood—and he had always been vocal on this point, as on all others stamped with conventional approval—Charles did not regard any woman as his equal. Friendship between man and woman was incomprehensible to him.

Alec, however, was invariably disturbed by her outspoken gratitude. "Good to you!" he protested, so vehemently that she started. "But it's you who are good to me! You wouldn't know it, of course, but you've let me out of hell. I hated Julie. I hated even her memory. I used to wish I could go out and dig her up, so that I could kill her over again and watch her die."

The savage words, spoken in his low controlled tones, took on an added horror. Mrs. Willard winced.

"Idea hurt you?" he demanded roughly. "Or do you just think it's pretty to pretend it does?"

Mrs. Willard brushed her cheek against his shoulder. "I used to hate Charles too," she confessed. "But it doesn't seem to make much sense."

He relaxed. "It doesn't. But there are some things with which sense has damned little to do."

They were silent for a time. Suddenly he laughed contemptuously. "That was Alec Maclane, the single suffering martyr, sounding off about his operation. While you, handcuffed to that—handcuffed to Charles, you've probably been through twenty times what I have."

Mrs. Willard said nothing.

"Well, I find I don't hate her any more. You've done that for me. I'll not live long enough to do as much for you. Don't get me wrong; I'm not being sentimental about it, or remorseful. Just expedient. Hatred's hard on the hater." He lifted her face to his; his mouth twitched. "If Sandy were here he'd say, 'Tell her thank you.' He loved his mother, of course."

Mrs. Willard was silent for a time with the weight of her longing to comfort him. "But you are good to me, Alec," she insisted gently at last, "and to the children too. You don't realize it because—well, I suppose it's only what most people would take for granted. Having been 'handcuffed to Charles,' as you so accurately put it," she smiled up at him, "I've learned to count my blessings in that direction. Richard and Laura have too, I imagine. Richard adores you."

"Richard's a grand kid."

"He'd have been just as fond of Charles," Mrs. Willard said with a long sigh, "if he'd ever been allowed to. Even now I don't know—if Charles would give him half a chance ——"

Maclane agreed. "They're endlessly forgiving, youngsters, up to a point—and it takes a long time and a lot of mishandling to bring them to that point. Even in adolescence—late adolescence—when it would seem reasonable to assume that they've had time for some hardening, they're pretty unpredictable." He hesitated a moment, then cupped her hand in his own, looking down at it. "Richard might turn against me if he knew about you and me, you know. Even, possibly, against you."

Mrs. Willard was silent.

"Of course," Alec went on, "I don't think he would. Not against you, at any rate. But there's the possibility. If either of them objected at all, it would probably be Richard, not Laura—although I gather he's had a great deal more to bear from his father than she has."

"Oh, it would be Richard!" Mrs. Willard instantly admitted. "But I don't—I don't really believe either of them would." She looked up, perplexed. "Anyway, I can't help loving you, Alec. And what they don't know won't hurt them."

"No. Oh, Edith, you're so sweet. You're so damned sweet," he said again. He clasped her to him, releasing her at once as a clambering couple appeared through the woods on a distant hill. "The only thing I object to about this place," he complained, "is the population."

Mrs. Willard laughed. "Why, Dr. Maclane! When everybody's so interested in you!"

"You've noticed it too, then?"

"Noticed it! Mrs. Turner's table conversation for days has been bulging with hints about what's going to happen to family life in this country if somebody doesn't come out with gumption enough to expose these philandering married women for just what they are. I asked her what they were," Mrs. Willard confessed.

Maclane was amused. "You didn't!"

"Oh, yes, I did. And she was so infuriated she almost told me. I wish she had," said Mrs. Willard pensively. "Alec," she added suddenly, "there's something odd about Charles' letters lately. He's been putting me in the past tense."

"Putting you in the past tense?"

"When he writes, I mean. He's always scolded me in his letters, as I've told you. He's always pointed out what I do and don't do and what's wrong with both. But here lately"—Mrs. Willard took a letter from the pocket of her jerkin—"he's started saying 'You have always' and 'You have never.' If it were anyone but Charles I'd think he was trying to justify himself in something."

"Charles never thinks he needs justification?"

"I can't imagine him thinking so. Listen." She unfolded

the letter and read: "‘You have invariably opposed your will against mine in matters involving the children, apparently with no regard to my being the head of the family and as such entitled to your respect. And you have never been a housekeeper. I feel that I have shown you great patience here, for until I was married I never knew what it was to see a disorderly house when I returned home. I have made due allowances for your being employed in an office, but, as Aunt Gertrude has pointed out, there are many women who accomplish both.’ And here: ‘In spite of the fact that I have never been unfaithful to you, I cannot feel that you have ever actually appreciated your good fortune or my consideration in this respect ——’ "

Maclane stopped her. "You're making this up."

"See for yourself."

He shook his head. "No, thanks. Is that his regular style?"

"Except for the change of tense, as I've told you." Mrs. Willard laughed suddenly. "Once he wrote me when I was out at Virginia's—I've told you about her—and I was angry and tore the letter in two and sent it back. He wrote again by return mail and said there was no occasion for me to violate the ordinary epistolary courtesies."

"Not in those words?"

"In those words. He knows even longer ones," Mrs. Willard attested with some complacency. "He's a Ph.D."

Maclane grinned. "*Magna cum laude*, I suppose."

"*Maxima cum laude*," corrected Mrs. Willard firmly.

"Hallelujah," Maclane returned, kissing her.

THE "change of tense" in Charles' letters puzzled Mrs. Willard. After eighteen years in her husband's society, she would have undertaken against any odds to predict his exact response in word and deed to anything she or any other member of the family might say or do. Charles' patterns of thought were rigid in the extreme. A new response, differ it never so minutely from the routine one, could mean only a new stimulus, and Mrs. Willard was not aware of having provided such a stimulus.

Had her absence, perhaps, provided it? Was Charles so well content with Aunt Gertrude and her safety pins, Aunt Gertrude and her antimacassars, Aunt Gertrude and her well-scrubbed floors, her well-polished windows, and her symbolically well-stayed bosom, that his will to continue in this sanitary paradise had got the upper hand of his sense of responsibility for his inconvenient and embarrassing wife? For Mrs. Willard knew well enough that she had been an embarrassment to him and a disappointment; her ways were not his ways nor his thoughts her thoughts. "I am the head of this family!" he had shouted at her. Yet he had never been its actual head, and it was herself who had kept him from it. Whatever compulsion he had put upon her to gain his will externally, whatever had been her external submission to that will, he had had no effect upon the spun-steel core of her separate personality. The same was true of the children. For all his frantic pounding at the portals, he stood outside their lives and shouted into silence.

"But I did try," Mrs. Willard told herself, uneasily. "I did ——"

Her thoughts halted. "I didn't," she flatly contradicted herself. "I never did, actually." For a moment she was dizzy with her realization that Charles had after all been little more insistent upon his way of life than had she upon hers; that the mere preposterousness of his standards, the mere rigidity of his ideas, the mere fury of his objurgations, had obscured entirely from her view the now perfectly obvious fact that his life with her had been to him a perennial frustration no less certainly than had hers with him. "Why, poor Charles," she thought, startled and impressed. "But I should think he'd be *glad* to get rid of me!"

She considered this possibility, then shook her head. It was too much to hope for. If it were conceivable that anything could jolt Charles out of his death grip on the conventions it might be so, but this was not conceivable. Certainly her prospective request that he be so kind as to step out of her life and make room for another man was not calculated to accomplish it.

Mrs. Willard sighed. "Well, there's nothing I can do about it now." She had a sense of loss, the inner vacancy that remains when mental underpinnings that have supported one for years are suddenly swept away. Mildly apologetic toward Charles and more than mildly perturbed at thought of the reckoning that was to come, she turned from both these emotions to the one that eclipsed all others. The revelation about Charles had changed her somewhat, but changes of greater moment were making themselves felt. As the bright days slid by—too fast, too fast!—she shrank more and more from the prospect of ever returning, out of this newly liberated life of her own, into the straitly posed, the barred and barricaded life she had known in Chicago. Moreover, that alteration predicted by Maclane in the quality of her love for him was gradually but with heart-stopping inevitability

and power coming into its own. She had begun to long for Alec as he longed for her.

His companionship on the trails and byways, his quick and brotherly tenderness, his rare laughter—all the things that had been meat and drink to her when she was starved for them—no longer sufficed her now that she had but to reach out her hand and take them. She trembled, now, when he approached her. Her hands in his were cold, and colder than frost itself against her flaming cheeks when he had gone.

It was a remark of Clara Hemingway's that revealed to her how far she had come, how briskly crackled the burning bridges she had left behind. Clara had forgiven her husband for kissing Baby. "One has to make allowances for men," she told Mrs. Willard with a quietly sensible air, her pale eyes behind their glasses seeking confirmation. "They're different from us, you know. It's their nature to be—well, passionate."

Mrs. Willard, signifying, to save discussion, the perfunctory agreement Clara expected, realized with a shock of surprise that less than two weeks earlier she could have agreed in all good faith.

Through this realization, once for all, the feverish longing within her stood explained and revealed. Yet, remembering Charles—for she did remember him frequently in spite of herself, and always nowadays with the sensations of one who has just been struck with a knotted club in the pit of the stomach—she knew moments when she had small hope of its ultimate fulfillment. Eighteen years of marriage is not lightly tossed aside.

She was dimly aware, through her preoccupation, that to some extent her deliberations were shared by everyone in residence at the inn. Alec's visits, though not more frequent than might have been expected of a physician still in professional attendance, were obviously unnecessary to a patient

in such glowing health as Mrs. Willard now displayed. Even her atrophied wrist was nearly normal again. And a resort to which people come for relaxation in the summertime, she knew, is not a place where dalliance can blush unseen. Daily at table she was offered, by first one and then another of her fellow guests, what succulent bait their ingenuity could devise; and daily she brushed it aside or ignored it with intelligent and imperturbable calm. She was very grateful to be able to do so. Mrs. Willard had always liked her mind, even in its more phantasmagoric phases, and she had never felt greater affection for it than now, when she marked how it stood by her in a time of emergency.

"People's sense of responsibility for what is none of their business," she observed to Alec after a luncheon at which there had been little conversation anywhere at the table that did not at least skirt the edges of her presumable relation to her devoted physician, "is colossal."

"Be reasonable, darling," returned Maclane. "You can't expect Mrs. Turner to understand how you feel. There is such a thing as convention, you know."

"Are you telling me?" Mrs. Willard laughed irrepressibly. "I had a popular magazine in the house not long ago, with a cover picture of a man kissing a girl. Charles made me get rid of it. He said if Laura saw that sort of thing about the house she'd eventually get the idea that such behavior is natural."

"Edith," Maclane reproved her. "Resist this tendency. I don't like to call you a liar, but ——"

"He did so," affirmed Mrs. Willard. "I wish I may die and rest forever in the bosom of Miss Mothershead if he didn't."

"Ye gods." Maclane rose and stretched himself. "And there's not a straw in your hair. You really are wonderful, my lamb." He smiled down at her. They had stopped to rest in his shack after a long ramble in the woods, and it had

begun to rain. Mrs. Willard, half buried in a deep chair draped with discarded newspapers and an old tweed coat, thought dreamily of other rainy afternoons with Alec, dim in the peaceful mists of the future; of Richard working side by side with the man whose work he loved; of Laura growing into life with knowledge of gentleness and security toward love. She was very happy.

MacLane's attention had been caught by a small headline in one of the three-day-old newspapers. "Look at that." He pointed it out to her. "That means war."

Mrs. Willard felt her muscles grow tense. "Would you go, Alec?"

"Probably." He looked at her. "We haven't much time, Edith."

"No," Mrs. Willard said, getting out of her chair. "No," she said again thickly, as she moved over to the window. The rain had stopped, and a violet-edged shaft of dazzling sunshine clove the woods across the road like a huge sword thrusting through. "Richard too," she added in a muffled voice.

He came to stand beside her, taking her in his arms. For a long moment they stood so, watching the dance of light on the dripping leaves. "Edith," the man said at last, huskily. "Need you keep me waiting any longer?"

The shaft of light quivered and disappeared. "No, Alec," said Mrs. Willard steadily.

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THERE could be no question now of going back to Charles. Mrs. Willard recoiled from the idea with repulsion, an actual and violent horror comparable only, in all her experience, to

her feeling toward Miss Mothershead. Her life, she now felt, was cleansed of them both, and never again could she suffer either of them to impinge upon it. Not for any consideration of pity, convention, or fear would she betray Alec now; not for Richard, not for Laura. Her path ahead was far from clear, especially where the children were concerned, but at the end of that path, whithersoever it might lead her, would always stand Alec Maclane.

He had taken to bringing her small gifts, always surprising, always to her adorable. One Saturday morning he turned up with a pale-beige fluff under his coat, which on emergence proved to be a sherry-eyed cocker pup.

"Alec! Oh, the angel!" she cried, snuggling the puppy up under her chin. "Well—wudda wudda," she consoled him as he whined and tried to lick her face.

Maclane stood regarding them. "Put him down a minute. I want you to see him walk."

The puppy broke into an absurd rocking-horse run, their laughter following him. "But I can't keep him here, Alec. Mrs. Metz wouldn't have him."

"No, I suppose not. I never thought of that. I'll keep him, then, until you're ready to come home to us." His eyes met hers, and bliss flooded through her. "I'll bring him out whenever I come, so you can keep up the acquaintance. Richard and Laura will like him, what?"

"They'll love him." Mrs. Willard picked up the puppy and cuddled him. "They're coming out today, you know."

"Oh, yes," Maclane remembered. "Well, you'll have company, then, even if I can't stay. I have to go back—consultation. I'll be out again tomorrow. When are they due to get here?"

Mrs. Willard glanced down the road toward the station. "Why, there they come now. That's Richard's orange sweater."

"My God," remarked Maclane mildly. "They've multiplied."

Mrs. Willard laughed. "It's only Looney and Joanne."

Laura, catching sight of her mother and Maclane, waved a hand, and all four youngsters began to run toward them. Laura was first to notice the pup, which she seized from her mother's hands with squeals of ecstasy. "Oh, the darling little wip! What's his name? Is he yours, Dr. Maclane?"

Maclane nodded. "I haven't named him yet."

"Call him Wippy," advised Laura. "Yes, he was a silly little wip!" she told the puppy.

"Call him Wippy by all means, if you like," Maclane assented. "Well, Richard, how's the neurology? Seen any good plexuses lately?" He laid a hand affectionately on the boy's shoulder. "I must go," he said to Mrs. Willard. "See you tomorrow," his glance promised.

"But you aren't taking Wippy, are you?" cried Laura. "Oh, let him stay!"

"Your mother says Mrs. Metz wouldn't have him." Maclane took the pup gently from her reluctant hands and put him into the car. "I'll bring him back someday soon. Good-by, all of you."

Mrs. Willard, turning with a smile as the car disappeared around the bend, joined her young guests. "Well! How are things at home?"

"All right, I suppose," Laura returned indifferently. "Aunt Gertrude's got a new dress. Without any safety pins—ain't that a hepl! . . . There's the luncheon bell, goody goody. I'm hungry. Looney, pet, pick up your feet—or are those things feet?" She bent a critical gaze on Looney's irreproachable nether extremities. "Disgusting. He wears clean saddle shoes. There is no hope for him." She and Looney lifted up their voices in doleful unison: "Ah, such is life in a cold, cold world, where all is hard and bitterness reigns!" Punctually

concluding this impressive chant, they swung about on their heels, faced each other, saluted, and made off at breakneck speed toward the house.

"Dopes," commented Richard.

Mrs. Willard tucked her hand in Joanne's arm. "How are you, dear? Not feeling very well?" For Joanne, customarily as thoroughgoing a zany as Laura herself, had scarcely spoken or smiled.

"I'm all right, Mrs. Willard, thank you," Joanne replied dully. "Just tired, I guess."

"And hungry, probably. I am, anyway. We'd better hurry, or Looney and Laura will have gone through the dining room like a plague of locusts."

Looney and Laura were indeed doing well for themselves at the table already, but the entrance of Mrs. Willard with Richard and Joanne was received with bright-eyed interest nevertheless. Most of the rest of those present had lingered long enough on the veranda, even in the face of the summons to luncheon, to watch Dr. Maclane drive away. Mrs. Willard prepared herself for another bout with innuendo, which, she thought, for an opponent so many times defeated, displayed a surprising elasticity. Now here, now there along the table it bounded up ever and again, hopeful and undismayed; Mrs. Willard would lay it low, and it would bounce back from another quarter.

By the time it leapt at her from Mrs. Hanover's chair, however, Mrs. Willard had grown weary. "I can't agree with you," she replied flatly to that lady's none-too-subterranean remark about modern American moral standards. "I've been a great traveler in my time, and ——"

This produced a lull, less of conviction than of awe, perhaps, but still a lull; and Mrs. Willard ate her luncheon.

Richard and Laura came to her room to say good-by before they went back to Chicago, Joanne and Looney tactfully

remaining downstairs. "Well, darlings," she said, "I always hate to see you go. Laura, what's the matter with Joanne? She looks miserable."

"Oh, she is." Laura looked distressed. "Her mother's getting a divorce."

"Oh," said Mrs. Willard.

"Joanne feels terrible," Laura went on. "That makes another one. It seems as if everybody's mother I know of is getting a divorce or already has one."

"Bunch of quitters," growled Richard. "Can't take it."

"I don't think Mrs. Warburton's a quitter," Laura objected in quick defense. "Mother, do you know what he did—Mr. Warburton, I mean? They had a new little pup, no bigger than Wippy; and he put it out in the tool shed to sleep, and it was lonesome and cried. And he went out and stuffed tissue paper in its mouth and pasted its jaws together with adhesive tape."

"Laura, no!" Mrs. Willard exclaimed, revolted.

"Yes he did, Mother. And Mrs. Warburton said it was the last straw. Joanne said her mother said she didn't believe anybody on earth would blame her if she did divorce him."

"Divorce him! I'd have shot him," said Mrs. Willard violently, if untruthfully. "But then why does Joanne take it so hard? I should think, if he's that kind of man, she'd be more glad than sorry."

"Oh, well." Laura seemed unable to explain Joanne's unhappiness, although she obviously understood it. "She just feels bad. Anybody would if their home was broken up."

"I suppose so. But you can't really blame Mrs. Warburton, Laura. Probably, if he did a thing like that, he's been cruel many times before. One can never ——"

Laura moved restlessly. "Well, she feels terrible. Joanne, I mean." She twisted a corner of Mrs. Willard's bedspread. "Richard and I and Looney are about the only ones left in

our whole crowd at school whose parents aren't divorced. Looney's parents are awfully nice," she added.

"Well, it's a difficult question," Mrs. Willard said, shivering slightly. "But you can see, can't you, Richard, that it isn't fair just to cry 'Quitter' and let it go at that? There are so many things to be considered ——"

"Everybody's got things to put up with," Richard maintained dogmatically. "They don't have to drag 'em out in public and have everybody talking about them."

"No, of course not. But ——" Mrs. Willard made an attempt to lighten the conversation to a suitable note of parting. "As Mr. Parker was saying at breakfast this morning, 'Married partners can be pretty trying.' He'd been reading a newspaper account, he said, of a poor old lady in Canada who sued for divorce after more than sixty years with the same husband. She told the court she 'had to have a little peace *some* time.'"

Both Richard and Laura laughed, but without much conviction. Mrs. Willard, after they had left her, fell prey to the heaviest misgivings that had yet assailed her. How right Alec had been when he called them unpredictable, these callow hoverers on the outer edges of maturity! How shy they were beneath their protective coloring of careful sophistication; how fleetly timid, alarmed and affrighted as young deer in the forest, at any threatened contact with "talk" or unpleasant publicity! How helplessly dependent on the adults who controlled their destinies! Joanne Warburton, whose father could maltreat a defenseless puppy, must have known many times in the sixteen years of her life the sickening impact of personal cruelty of one kind or another, both upon herself and upon her mother; and yet Joanne's eyes this afternoon had been red from weeping and stricken with woe. Were Richard and Laura, in spite of everything, actually much different from the little boy and

girl who had shaken their heads and cried "Poor Daddy" on that long-ago morning when she had tried to take them from him?

Mrs. Willard did not know, and she was greatly troubled. On Alec's return next day she told him what they had said and why. He had walked with her down to the throne on the hillock, and she faltered, twisting a heavy ring on his finger, as she recounted the incident and the anxiety it had caused her. "When you're here with me, Alec, I'm so sure, I'm so happy with you, I'm so certain I could never get along without you, I want you so much—why, I'd give anything, my life even, rather than not to have had even this much of you; do you think I could ever have gone to Charles this way if I needed comfort? I—I know I'm not making sense," she stammered, "but I love you so, Alec. And sometimes, when you're not here, I'm so frightened and uncertain ——"

"I know. Take it easy, Edith." He held her close to him. "I know. It's a tough proposition. As for the youngsters"—he drew in his breath sharply—"it'll take time. Maybe more time, maybe less. But I think they'll come round. Richard likes me now, doesn't he?"

Mrs. Willard made a muffled sound of assent.

"And Laura hasn't, at least, any obvious objection to me. Strictly as a person, I mean, of course. What their attachment to their father amounts to it's impossible for either you or me to judge. We'll just have to be patient."

Mrs. Willard put her face down on his shoulder. "I love you, Alec," she whispered.

"I know you do, my heart," Alec said simply.

Suddenly she bent her head and kissed his hand below the ring. He drew it away in quick protest. "No, no, Edith! I can't bear to have you seem humble. Not to me."

"It's not to you. It's to love. It's so much bigger than I ever—than I ever ——"

For a long time they were silent. "Poor Charles," Mrs. Willard murmured at length. "He's never dreamed of what it means really to love anyone, he's so frozen up within himself. I used to think I'd tried to help him, but I didn't really; I just tried to get him to give me what I wanted; you know, peace and—and affection. And I could never go to him and tell him I was unhappy, or restless, or had been foolish, or anything like that; he would always turn bitter and blame me, always, always."

He made no answer except to draw her closer.

"And then, later—when I found that was no use—I suppose I more or less froze over, myself, and let it go at that. Virginia always laughed at me because I didn't know anything about love and was so firm about not wanting to."

Maclane smiled. "I remember your being firm about it once to me."

"In the hospital? Yes, I remember." Mrs. Willard laughed faintly. "That was my lowest point. I thought the stars in their courses were not only fighting against me but hitting below the belt. Calling in a cross-country bus to—to ——"

"To do their dirty work for them?" supplied Maclane.

"Exactly." She leaned back against his arm. "I was an awful fool," she added meditatively.

He tightened his arm about her. "Maybe it's now you're a fool."

"Oh, well." Mrs. Willard smiled contentedly. "It's a fool's world."

IF MRS. WILLARD had had any slightest doubt of the stanchness of Alec's devotion to her, this conversation, in which her children figured so largely, would have removed it. "We'll just have to be patient," he had said, patiently—he the impatient, the tense, the intransigent.

In these few weeks he had come to know her as Charles in eighteen years of marriage had never done. He realized what Richard and Laura meant to her. He knew that she could not deal them any conscious blow. He had left her free to enjoy the first flush of love and to learn of its rich maturing; and no less free he left her now, to ponder within herself the responsibilities for which she was answerable, in the last analysis, only to that inward arbiter she was wont to think of, after the sanguine manner of mankind, as her soul.

For he had simply taken their eventual marriage for granted, leaving it to her to say when she would come. There was no need for her to assure him that her life with Charles was over. His trust in her, now that his self-raised barriers were down, was complete. He would not influence her by so much as a pin's weight except as his love made its intrinsic claim.

And indeed the exquisite hours she spent with him were claim enough. It seemed to Mrs. Willard, after her eighteen years of frustration, that such happiness, such absolute bliss as she and Alec had found together must soon and certainly perish, even of its own intensity. It could not possibly endure; nay, it could not possibly even exist. Not actually.

"It's a mirage," she told Maclane.

"It is, is it?" Alec yawned contentedly. "What makes you think so?"

"I hope I know as much as Toopy did," Mrs. Willard replied. "I hope I can ——"

Maclane grinned. "Now who in the hell is Toopy?"

"When I was a little girl," explained Mrs. Willard patiently, "we had a collie pup named Toopy and a big yellow cat called Tom. Toopy adored Tom and was always wanting to lick him all over, and it made Tom furious. He used to bat poor little Toopy halfway across the room. But Toopy would always come back and try it again; only after the first two or three times he'd come with his ears already flattened." Mrs. Willard laughed. "He used to look so funny, wagging his tail like mad, with his ears laid back. Just like me approaching life, I mean—after Charles."

"Blast his sniveling soul," interposed Alec cheerfully.

Mrs. Willard laughed at the incongruity of words and tone, but shook her head. "That's not really necessary now, Alec, do you think? Wouldn't it be kinder to hope that some good woman—no, no, don't throw it! I'm allergic to feathers. Reach down there and see if you can find my slippers, won't you?"

Maclane groped for the vast pair of felt slippers Mrs. Willard sometimes wore about the shack, to rest after a long hike. "You kick them off," he complained, "and they always land half across the room in exactly the same position, one of them pointed one way and the other backward. How in hell do you do it?"

Mrs. Willard looked complacent. "I can't imagine."

Maclane shouted with laughter. Mrs. Willard gazed at him proudly. How far he had come since that day in the hospital, since that ride along the lake shore when he had spoken so bitterly of his wife; and how short the time had been, after all! Had she really done all that for him? "I like myself better than I used to," she remarked musingly.

Maclane laughed again. "Were you much troubled with self-detestation?"

"More than you'd think." Mrs. Willard reflected. "It used to wear me down to know I was being such a coward about Charles' temper. And then too," she added as an afterthought, with the inconsequence that invariably delighted him, "I once stole the flags of all nations."

Alec blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

"From my grandmother. She had them in the attic, left over from some children's pageant she'd had charge of. I stole them and took them home and hid them under the porch. It rained and spoiled them. But I didn't like them any more, anyway. I was a very conscientious child."

"I'll bet you were." He bent above her. "Ah, Edith, I adore you!"

Although Mrs. Willard, having been long accustomed to stress and terror and tension—which, after all, are much the same at all times—was perhaps less perturbed by the threat of war than many another might have been, this threat did heighten to an almost unbearable degree the sense of Alec's dearness to her and of her need of him. She accepted it stoically nevertheless, as usual making her adjustment almost without knowledge that she did so. At the thought of Richard, to be sure, her heart failed her at first; but later thought brought comfort in its train. If Richard would be cut off from the brightened life she had hoped her marriage to Alec would bring him, at least it was certain that he would also be removed from the grating and grinding influence of Charles upon his still immature personality.

Alec agreed with her. "He'll be off, no doubt, at the first possible chance. But it'll be very good for him, Edith. And, as for the danger, I wouldn't give two cents for his chances of either happiness or success if he were left even partially under that influence much longer. It's a damned sight

better to be peacefully dead than to live with a broken spirit."

"Charles couldn't have broken Richard's spirit."

"Maybe he couldn't. But, failing that, there are several other things he might have done. How would you have liked it if the boy had got to be like his father? If he had grown into the same bullying habits, making life hell for everybody within reach?"

"Richard!" cried Mrs. Willard incredulously.

"Could be," Maclane maintained. "Seen it happen." He put his arm about her. "You had no business leaving him in that situation, darling, and that's God's truth. Be thankful nothing worse has come of it. Stout fellow, Richard. He'll make a good soldier."

Mrs. Willard smiled. "He will, won't he?"

The afternoon sun was sinking. "Time to get back to the inn," Maclane observed with a glance at his wrist, "before Mrs. Turner gets the morals squad out." He lighted a cigarette and rose, preparing to go.

Mrs. Willard set about her own preparations. "Are you staying to dinner, Alec?"

He shook his head. "Can't. Engagement with Kellway." He looked about him. "Have you got everything you want?"

Mrs. Willard's glance followed his. "I think so." She came to him, and his arms closed about her in a long embrace.

IN THE last golden week of her stay at the inn Mrs. Willard saw Alec but once. "I have to go to Philadelphia," he told her. "I'm scheduled to speak at the state neurologic convention, and there are several conferences. I'll be gone about two

weeks. I suppose you'll be back in Chicago before that much time has passed?"

"I suppose so."

MacLane scowled at a patch of moss on a giant root. "Well—keep your chin up. I'll be waiting to hear from you."

Mrs. Willard was silent.

The man too did not speak for some time. After a day in the shack they had come far into the woods, not down the brookside trail but to a place they had not found before; high on a wooded dune, with a carpet of pine needles, brown from a year of changeful weather, stretched smoother than satin under their feet. Now and then a squirrel, encouraged by their silence, approached them, its shadowy tail alert as it sat and watched. The red flash of a cardinal in the dark boughs overhead imprinted itself once and forever in Mrs. Willard's memory.

"Alec ——" She laid her cheek against his arm and laughed a little, helplessly. "I know I must seem perfectly witless, but I can hardly bear the thought of not seeing you for two weeks."

"Well, if misery loves company—I'm lost without you. Lost." He put his hand over hers and gripped it, hard. "Edith, what am I going to do if——" his voice suddenly thickened—"if you don't come to me at last?"

She looked up to meet his eyes, and at what she saw there her mouth trembled. "I'll come to you, Alec," she promised, putting both her hands under his.

He did not kiss her; instead, he held her gaze with his for a long time, his hand still gripping both her own. Then, with a deep contented sigh, he relaxed and put his arm about her. "Not too long, Edith?"

"Oh, not long, Alec." She sighed. "The sooner it's over ——"

He agreed, silently.

"I'll—I'll tell Charles when I go home," Mrs. Willard continued. "As soon as I can. Alec, I'm such a coward! Most of the time it seems as though I could not do it, and then—I think of just two weeks without you, and I know I've got to. I've got to. Oh, it will be hard!"

"Harder to tell Charles than to tell the children?"

"Oh, yes. Charles is so tight and tense, so locked up within himself, that it takes forever to get him detached enough to listen seriously to anything anybody else has to say. I'll spend hours working myself up to the point, and then use up every bit of the strength I've gathered just getting his attention! After that——" Mrs. Willard made a gesture of exhaustion. "It'll be horrible, Alec. It's bound to be." She paused. "As for the children——" She halted again.

"They both adore you."

She looked up, pleased. "Do you think so?" she asked humbly. "I've tried to be nice to them; they've been such fun to me always." She smiled reminiscently. "I keep remembering them when they were little, all sorts of silly, funny little things they did. They were so—but you mustn't let me talk like a dotard, Alec. You really mustn't."

"I like to hear you." Maclane smiled. "You know, in many ways you seem to me the most remarkable mother I've ever known."

"I do?" Mrs. Willard exclaimed in complete astonishment. "Charles thinks I'm a terrible mother," she objected.

"He does, does he? Why?"

"I don't know exactly. I think he thinks I ought to 'impress upon the children'—he's always wanting things impressed upon them—that I am their mother and that motherhood is—well, you know, sacred and all that. You know what I mean. I think he'd even like me to weep over them."

"Weep over them—my God. But yes, I suppose he would. Well, for such an 'unnat'ral payrent,' you haven't done badly.

You've left Richard and Laura free to be themselves, and you've kept their respect and their love. I think they'll stand by you."

"Oh, Alec, I hope so, I hope so! If they didn't ——" Panic flew suddenly into Mrs. Willard's eyes. "Alec, suppose he took them away from me?"

"At their age? Don't be fantastic. They'll be given a choice. I don't suppose there's any danger of their choosing Charles?"

Mrs. Willard laughed involuntarily, then fell abruptly silent. "Richard just might, if he felt outraged enough," she admitted. "But I don't believe either of them will."

"Neither do I. I've been thinking over what you told me they said." Maclane plunged his hands into his pockets and paced back and forth as he talked. "I've about come to the conclusion that their attitude toward divorce is purely derivative. I mean to say, they've simply adopted what they assume to be your attitude—subconsciously, no doubt. Your own unwillingness to face up to the situation and do what was obviously called for has built up a wall of inhibitions around all three of you. If they could once be thoroughly convinced that you actually wanted the break ——"

Mrs. Willard looked anxious. "Do you mean I ought to tell them I do?"

"Hell, no. That wouldn't do any good; they wouldn't believe it. What I'm counting on is that when you go to Charles with your declaration of independence something will happen to ram a hole in the wall. I wouldn't shield them too carefully from what takes place if I were you." He glanced at his wrist. "Time to go, I'm afraid." He drew her into his arms and buried his face in her neck.

"Alec," she cried strangely, "listen. Listen to this moment. It'll never come again." Her voice caught in a half sob.

He lifted his head quickly. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know. I don't know. Nothing. Only it's all so—so

flying"—she tried to find words—"and so sweet, Alec." Her voice was a whisper. "So unbearably sweet," she breathed. "Kiss me good-by, Alec."

She walked back to the inn alone. With him, although the sun flamed overhead and the woods were lush with growth and fragrance, it seemed to her the summer had gone. Storms now for her, and freezing, and the wild winds of anger and fear; and then, if she were lucky, peace at last.

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WITH some obscure idea that it was her duty to get Aunt Gertrude's money's worth out of the experience, Mrs. Willard tried conscientiously to bask in the sunshine and enjoy the woods as she had done at first. But these pleasures, simple and free as the rain-washed breeze of morning, were no longer available to her. As the coming of Alec had transformed the world, so his going bereft it of all luster; nothing remained, nothing at all, of the supernal meaning and beauty she had found in it while he was with her. She felt the heat now, and the long empty silences that had once enchanted her were heavy with the weight of his absence.

Moreover, Charles, who for weeks had been a pale and pithless figure lurking on the shadowy outskirts of her consciousness, now emerged alive and inexorable. The dreadful patience bred in her by years of submission tempted her as never before, telling her variously, at various times, that she had no right to take her hand from the plow, even though at Charles' behest she plowed on solid stone; that she was traitor to her children, and all her fine protestations of devotion to them revealed as tinsel lies; that it was ridiculous of her, having these tall children, to suppose herself in love; that love

itself was more than probably ridiculous and that she, gulled by its specious claims, was about to furnish forth a shameful spectacle to a derisive and merciless world. Mrs. Willard told herself that she knew better than to believe any of this, but now that Alec had gone she found it hard indeed to see beyond the forthcoming interview with Charles. She looked forward to this encounter with much the same shuddering horror that might possess one about to undergo an amputation without anesthetics.

At this point, any interruption of her troubled cogitations would have been welcome. A sudden and totally unexpected telephone call from Virginia Teagarden, therefore, was somewhat more than welcome; Mrs. Willard cried out with joy. "Virginia! Where on earth did you come from?"

"Switzerland, most recently," Virginia's husky voice replied. "Things are hotting up all over Europe a bit too much for comfort. I was fed to the teeth with it, anyway. Old women."

"What?"

"Old women. You know. Sequins up to their ears to hide the gathers in their necks. Like a lot of turkey gobblers that have died and gone to heaven."

Mrs. Willard laughed. "You're in Chicago now?"

"I am indeed. Incidentally, my little cabbage, what gives with you? Correct me if I'm wrong, but there's been a certain something about your recent letters ——"

"Come on out and see, why don't you?" Mrs. Willard suggested. "Mrs. Metz is full up, I believe. But you can share my room."

"Um." Virginia considered. "There is much in what you say. How do I get there?"

"South Shore. And hurry up."

"Expect me," replied Virginia, "in one hour, with my hair in a braid." The receiver clicked.

Mrs. Willard sought Mrs. Metz. "I've a friend coming out, Mrs. Metz," she said. "I know you haven't a room, but she can share mine. That'll be all right, won't it?"

"Yes, that's all right, Mrs. Willard. I can always put on another plate for meals."

Mrs. Willard, half distracted with pleasure and surprise, composed herself to await Virginia's arrival. The relief, the heavenly relief of having Virginia to talk to! At any other time she would have been agog to listen to Virginia's colorful tales of her own doubtless electrifying adventures, but now, with the weight of her tremendous secret heavy upon her, she longed only to unburden herself. Virginia was the one person on earth to whom she could bring herself to speak of Alec.

The time of waiting seemed interminable. She tidied her room; she took a leisurely bath; she arranged her hair with unaccustomed deliberation, though with shaking fingers; and still Virginia had not come. She went down to the veranda and tried, without success, to read. She was just casting the book aside in despair when the station taxicab drove up and disgorged a plump businesslike man, his plump businesslike wife, three plump businesslike children, and Virginia.

Mrs. Teagarden looked appropriately cosmopolitan and Continental; her small handbag was squirming with foreign labels. Mrs. Willard laughed aloud in sheer delight. "Virginia! Virginia!"

"Hello, darling. My God, you're radiant. This is too much, really. Or isn't it me you're blooming about? No? I was afraid of that. Well!"

They stood and smiled at each other. Mrs. Metz, in the doorway, was regretfully turning the plump family away.

"Come on upstairs. It's not dinnertime yet." Mrs. Willard was almost too blissful to contain herself. The sight and sound of Virginia had brought back all her happiness in Alec and all her confidence in love.

"Now." Virginia tossed gloves and bag into a chair as Mrs. Willard threw open the bedroom door. "Tell me all." She cast herself down on the bed, stretching and turning with relief. "Omitting nothing." She fixed Mrs. Willard with a piercing eye.

Mrs. Willard omitted little. She spoke haltingly at first. Pleasure at Virginia's return, gratitude for the honest affection that lay behind Virginia's raillery, and the sense of inadequacy that assails the lover commanded to give an account of love, all conspired against fluency, even against articulation. But Virginia listened in silence, and soon Mrs. Willard spoke more easily. "That's all," she said at last.

Virginia punched the pillow high under her dark head and lit a cigarette. "What do Richard and Laura think?"

"They don't know anything about it yet." Mrs. Willard hesitated. "Virginia—sometimes it seems—sometimes it almost seems"—Mrs. Willard had difficulty in bringing out this confession—"sometimes I almost feel as though it doesn't make any difference what they think!"

Virginia smiled. "I'll bet that nearly kills you. Well, relax, baby. You're quite right. It actually doesn't—or needn't. They can take it. They're nearly grown up. They've got their lives before them. But if you don't move damned fast you're not going to get any of yours. I hope your Alec is as nice as you think he is."

"He's nicer," said Mrs. Willard indignantly.

"Says you. But look what you picked last time."

Mrs. Willard laughed irresponsibly. Her heart was very light now. "I'm terribly happy," she confessed. "You remember what—you remember I said that time down by the lake, that if—if anything ——"

Virginia nodded, tapping ash from her cigarette. "I'm glad, Edith."

"I keep thinking of one of your sonnets." Mrs. Willard

rose and went over to the window, keeping her face averted. "I mean—nothing seems to count any more except this, and I keep hearing—remember? *We who were royal when the moment called Remark no poverty in light or flower; The testimony of our briefest hour Was ermine thrown on steps of emerald.*" Her voice failed on the last word.

Virginia got up and kissed her tenderly. "Attagirl," she said.

—31—

RELIEVED of her confidences, Mrs. Willard was gay. She and Virginia had a thoroughly satisfying evening, Virginia by her foreign clothes and full-bodied freedom of expression making a profound and enjoyable impression on Mrs. Metz's decorous dinner table. They escaped upstairs again as soon as possible, leaving Mrs. Hanover almost in the midst of remarking to Mrs. Teagarden that she too had been a great traveler in her time.

"What'll we do now?" Virginia demanded.

"Let's just lie and talk," proposed Mrs. Willard. "This is my last night here. I've got to go back to Chicago tomorrow evening." She sighed.

"Well, we ought to celebrate your emancipation, baby. I know; we'll celebrate tomorrow." Virginia kicked off her shoes. "We'll go on a hell of a long hike and stop somewhere and drink to your better choosing. If you can lend me some walking shoes and a jacket, that is. I've nothing with me, and this damned climate's tricky."

"I've got extra shoes, but no jacket. You can take my old brown tweed coat."

"Fair enough," said Virginia.

The next day dawned fine but chilly; it was as though Vir-

ginia's comment on the climate had brought on the breeze from the lake. The clean and windy air was like a cool shower bath.

"Nice," said Mrs. Willard as they set forth. She laughed suddenly. "Virginia, do you know what you look like?"

"Approximately," Virginia replied. "Why?"

"In that old coat, I mean. And those shoes. This is the first time I ever saw you without high heels. That is, when you had on any shoes at all," amended Mrs. Willard, remembering Tony.

Virginia felt in the pocket of the shabby coat for her cigarettes. "Well? How do I look?"

"You look ——" Mrs. Willard searched for an epithet. "Well, disreputable, more or less. Almost rowdy."

"As though I'd just been bouncing in a haymow, you mean? I can well believe it," Virginia returned quite amiably. "It's not the coat, darling; it's retribution. It comes and goes. I've looked like that before now in Lanvin's loofiest."

Mrs. Willard laughed. Virginia's companionship had relieved her entirely, for the time being, of the weight of worry she had been carrying, and beneath her enjoyment of the day and the walk there was a singing undercurrent of happiness. They walked briskly, the keen lake breeze urging them on. Mrs. Willard, with a summer of training behind her, was as tireless as a ten-year-old boy. Virginia, on the other hand, after a couple of hours showed signs of flagging.

"Nature's all right in its place," she grumbled, "but there's too much of it here. How much farther to a drink?"

"There's a place about a mile farther on."

"Oh, Lord!" Virginia stopped in her tracks. "And incidentally, my pigeonette, how do we get back to Mrs. Metz's?"

"Walk, of course," said Mrs. Willard. "How do you suppose?"

"Walk, eh?" returned Virginia skeptically, and spoke no more.

They arrived finally, Virginia actually limping with weariness, at the door of the lonely roadside tavern Mrs. Willard had noticed on previous rambles. Virginia staggered to a table and collapsed on the rough wooden bench beside it, propping her elbows on the red-checkered cloth to support her drooping head. "Scotch—you have Scotch? Scotch and soda," she said to the piratical Corsican proprietor, who approached them wiping his swart hands on a grimy towel.

Mrs. Willard duplicated the order. "Don't you want anything to eat, Virginia?" she suggested.

Virginia cast an eye over the smeared blackboard on the wall. "Nothing there that hasn't got meat in it. I'm not going to order meat in a place like this. He'd probably carve it off the corpse."

"What corpse?" Mrs. Willard looked interestedly about her.

"Well, he's sure to have one in the ice chest. I mean, look at him."

The proprietor was returning with the highballs. Mrs. Willard scrutinized him. "He does look as though he might be a bit careless with edged tools," she conceded when he had gone, having noted a long deep scar across one side of his face.

"I believe you. What a dive!" Virginia peered through the murky window nearest her. "Whoops! There's our ride, Edith. What did I tell you?"

A heavy beer truck had just pulled up outside, and two vociferous mustached Italians jumped down and racketed into the tavern, clamoring for whisky. Virginia sat up, alert and attentive at once. She spoke to Mrs. Willard in a tone totally different from her customary one, and the heads of the truckers, who were now propped against the bar, swiveled

round as though they had been set on ball bearings. Their eyes lighted up; their ready smiles flashed.

Mrs. Willard, horrified, was about to enter a quick protest. But Virginia, still in the new voice, was calling to the proprietor to bring two more highballs. "That'll give 'em time to have their drinks," she explained aside to Mrs. Willard.

"Virginia! You can't—we mustn't ——"

Virginia paid no attention to her; she was otherwise occupied. By the time the truckmen had finished their drinks—not the first they had had that afternoon, Mrs. Willard uneasily concluded—there had been established between them and Virginia a definite camaraderie of glance and tone; Virginia's casual "You boys going our way?" and her accompanying twitch of a thumb met with instant and cordial response.

"Sure! Sure!" said the larger of the two, smiling extensively. "We go your-a way. Wheech-a way you go?"

Mrs. Willard, in whose memory the bus accident lingered with too much vividness for comfort, was petrified with terror. She squeaked a final protest: "Virginia!"

But Virginia was already on her way out to the truck. Helplessly Mrs. Willard followed her.

At least, she reflected ruefully, she was spared any worry about the truckmen's personal attentions, for these were confined exclusively to Virginia. Wedged tightly in between the smaller truckman and the truck door, Mrs. Willard gritted her teeth and endured the careening of the truck as best she might, while Virginia and the two men shouted jovially at each other over the motor's roar, and occasional pedestrian passers-by, catching a chance word or two, turned noticeably paler. Mrs. Willard, cowering in her narrow allotment of space, imagined a succession of catastrophic endings to this mad expedition. All of them were improbable, she knew; but

none of them was impossible, especially with Virginia in the party.

Despondently she recalled a tale told her by Tony, to the effect that Virginia had once shot out a large arc light from a hotel window at two in the morning, because its radiance disturbed her and it was too warm to draw the shades.

"Shot it out?" Mrs. Willard had repeated incredulously.

"But yes. Ping! With an air rifle—what you call a beebee gun."

"But where did she get an air rifle in a hotel?"

Tony had shrugged his flexible shoulders. "That I cannot say. Virginia, she is always resourceful."

Mrs. Willard, remembering, sighed. Virginia's resourcefulness was no matter of admiration to her at the moment. Even if they escaped with life and limb intact, which seemed increasingly doubtful as the repartee waxed heartier, they would pull up at Mrs. Metz's in full sight of the assembled guests on the veranda, for the afternoon light was lengthening; it was nearing time for dinner. Mrs. Willard felt a hysteria blended of hilarity and embarrassment arising within her as she envisioned Mrs. Turner and Mrs. Hanover and Clara Hemingway catching sight of the beer truck; of the stalwart sons of Italy with their bannerlike black mustaches; of Virginia, whose incredibly raffish appearance seemed to grow more raffish by the moment. And Mr. Parker, the Dean of the Inn!

The truck veered sharply to one side and back to the middle of the road. Mrs. Willard shut her eyes and prayed. When she opened them the inn was actually in sight.

She tried to get Virginia's attention long enough to suggest that they ask to be dropped at a distance from the house. But Virginia and the larger truckman were now exchanging badi-nage concerning the latter's sweetheart, whom he called Fiametta and who would, he was loudly assuring Virginia,

tear both her and him apart—"like-a thees!" he generously illustrated, taking his hands from the wheel—if she could see them now.

"Husky bitch, is she?" screamed Virginia at the top of her voice.

The delighted Italian laughed loudly and shook his head. "Not-a hosky beetch," he replied, putting on his brake. The truck stopped with an attention-compelling squeal exactly at Mrs. Metz's front gate. "Not-a spacial hosky. Jos' sassy beetch." He clapped Virginia heartily on the shoulder. "Like-a you." He roared with laughter.

Mrs. Willard, feeling faint with relief, climbed down from the truck and waited while mutually satisfied leave-takings took place. The men having at length driven away, she staggered in Virginia's wake toward the house, noting grimly that the entire strength of the company seemed to be gathered on the veranda. Not one of them but would have heard the concluding remarks of both Virginia and the truckmen. Oh, well; it would soon be over, thought Mrs. Willard. Thank heaven, she was going back to Chicago tonight. So much was certain.

In another moment she was neither so sure nor so thankful. Truly on that wild ride she had imagined some still wilder outcomes; but none had she imagined so wild, or one half so cataclysmic, as that which now confronted her.

—32—

AUNT GERTRUDE, with that instinctive, punctual, and demoniac co-operation with the forces of evil destiny so characteristic of her kind, had that morning suggested to Charles that perhaps, in view of Mrs. Willard's well-known incapacity

for attending properly to details, it might be advisable for him to go out to Mrs. Metz's and accompany her home, seeing to it that her bill was paid and that none of her personal belongings remained in the inn's possession; and Mr. Willard, agreeing that it might, had reciprocally suggested that Aunt Gertrude and the children go with him. "The trip to the inn will be a pleasant outing," he pointed out, and sighed.

He and Aunt Gertrude had had a number of pleasant outings of one kind or another in Mrs. Willard's absence, all much more to his taste than anything he was accustomed to do when his wife was at home. They had repeatedly visited the Field Museum and the Shedd Aquarium; they had been entertained congenially at dinner by Miss Mothershead, and later had accompanied her to an Evening with Longfellow at her church parish house, followed by an educational motion picture explaining the current techniques of operation for appendicitis. Neither Mr. Willard, Aunt Gertrude, nor their hostess had seen this combination of diversions as anything but a happy and edifying one; but Mr. Willard at least knew from long and discouraging experience that Mrs. Willard would not have agreed with him. She never agreed with him about anything. And in this her children resembled her.

He knew his duty, nevertheless, and he would do it to the bitter end. He issued orders to Richard and Laura to prepare themselves to accompany him and, with them and Aunt Gertrude, took a late-afternoon train to the dunes. Arriving at the inn, he was informed that his wife had left immediately after luncheon to go hiking with a friend, and this friend, by a series of well-calculated questions to Mrs. Metz as he settled his wife's account, he was able only too readily to identify as Virginia Teagarden. "Your mother informed me," he said stiffly to the children, "that Mrs. Teagarden was in Europe."

Richard shrugged his shoulders.

"Do you know anything about this, Laura?"

Laura shook her head. "I suppose she came back," she answered, trying to speak lightly for the benefit of the half-dozen guests already resting on the veranda. "She's sort of sudden." Laura laughed nervously, and her father dealt her a warning look. Richard moved uneasily.

Charles turned to Mrs. Schnabel. "You will remember, Aunt Gertrude, this is the woman my wife visited some years ago. I have never met her, and what I have heard of her I do not like. I should be glad to know just how long this has been ——"

"Mrs. Teagarden's swell," Richard suddenly declared defiantly.

His father turned on him. "What's that you say?"

"Mrs. Teagarden," Richard maintained. "She's Mother's friend. Mother likes her. She's swell."

"Indeed? Do you really think so, Richard?" Charles' tone was heavily weighted with mock courtesy, but he smiled, to accent this otherwise perhaps too-subtle irony. Then his face hardened. "Kindly keep your opinion to yourself until it is asked for!" His tone was like the crack of a whip.

Richard clenched his fists, the knuckles whitening. He plunged both hands into his pockets and started down the veranda steps.

"Richard!"

The boy turned, dealing his father a glance of such fury that Laura, who had been scarlet with mortification, paled in dismay. She made an involuntary movement toward her brother.

"Sit down!" commanded Mr. Willard.

Richard flung himself into a chair. Mr. Willard's spectacles gleamed as he turned again to Mrs. Schnabel. "As I was saying, Aunt Gertrude ——"

At this unfortunate moment a multiple noise, clamorous

and indescribably lusty, made itself audible in the near distance; and a few minutes later those assembled on the veranda were treated to the stimulating spectacle of Mrs. Willard and Mrs. Teagarden being handed out of a beer truck by two more than slightly tipsy Italian workmen, one of whom was shouting, as he clapped Mrs. Teagarden on the shoulder, "Not-a hosky beetch. Not-a spacial hosky. Jos' sassy beetch"—*slap!*—"like-a you!"

A look almost of swooning crossed Charles Willard's face, to be succeeded by an expression of apoplectic rage. He made one indistinct sound, then was suddenly and sulphurously silent. There was a white line around his thin mouth.

The electrified guests caught their breath as one person. Aunt Gertrude laid her hand on her nephew's arm. Richard laughed, and Laura, starting at the sound, turned an appalled gaze from her mother's crimson countenance to her father's livid one. "Mother——"

Mrs. Willard, gathering up what forces remained to her, attempted nonchalance; she brushed a nonexistent dead leaf from the sleeve of her coat and tried to laugh. "Well, this is a surprise," she managed to say. "Mrs. Schnabel, Mrs. Teagarden. This is my husband, Virginia. Hello, darlings," to Richard and Laura. "I'm ——" She gulped. "I'm so glad you came along."

Richard had risen to give her his chair, and, heedless of Virginia still standing, she sank into it; her knees, indeed, had given way like boiled macaroni at sight of it.

"How do you do," Virginia said to Charles and Aunt Gertrude. "Richard, Laura, how're you doing?" She sat down beside Laura on the veranda floor. "I hope, Dr. Willard, I've not inconvenienced you by keeping Edith out so late. I didn't know she expected you, and we walked farther than we intended."

Charles neither looked at her nor spoke to her. He cleared

his throat. "I think perhaps we had better be going, Aunt Gertrude," he said icily.

Mrs. Schnabel rose promptly. "I think perhaps we had!"

Mrs. Willard shivered. "I can be ready in fifteen minutes, Charles."

Her husband did not look in her direction. "Have you anything here, Aunt Gertrude?" he inquired, glancing deliberately about him.

"No. Nothing." Mrs. Schnabel took his arm. "Richard. Laura." She motioned the children to follow them.

Richard stood up, scowling blackly, his hands still in his pockets. "I'm staying with my mother," he stated distinctly. "I'll come when she does."

Laura said nothing, but she did not move. Her face was white, and a still whiter area encircled her lips. She was making a desperate effort to keep back the tears.

There was a silence that ticked like a bomb. Presently both Mrs. Schnabel and Mr. Willard made as if to speak, but closed their lips again, and simultaneously, as though by mutual mechanism; turned, ceremoniously arm in arm; swept the assembled guests, Mrs. Willard, Richard, Laura, and Virginia with a final glance over their shoulders; and walked haughtily away. Mrs. Willard, her fascinated gaze fixed on her husband's rigid retreating back, had an insane impression that, instead of her having planned to divorce him in order to marry Alec, he had already and definitely set her aside in order to consummate, by his final rejection of those disturbing elements his wife and his children, the spiritual marriage he had always desired with Aunt Gertrude.

The silence, now empty, spread and widened. "I'll be damned," said Virginia at last, getting to her feet. She turned abruptly to the gaping Mrs. Hanover. "I've been a great traveler in my time, but I've never seen anything like that. Have you?" Her gaze returned to the receding couple, already in

the middle distance. "Come on, Laura, I've got something for you upstairs. Come help me unpack it. You too, Richard. Edith, you've dropped your glove."

At no time in her later life could Mrs. Willard remember getting out of her chair, passing among the stupefied guests, and following Virginia and the children upstairs. Yet she must have done so, for a few moments later she lay shuddering on her face in the bedroom, while Virginia brought cold wet cloths to lay on her throat and endeavored vicariously to relieve her feelings by picturesquely profane objurgations on Mr. Willard's rudeness. "Christ in the foothills," she fumed, "who does he think he is? . . . You're coming home with me tonight, Edith, all three of you. Then you can go back there tomorrow or whenever the hell you want to, leaving the kids with me, and get whatever you want to keep, and tell him that's all there is, there isn't any more, and come back. We'll take the first train after dinner."

Mrs. Willard lifted a ravaged face from the pillow. "I can't go down to dinner, Virginia. I can't."

"Oh, yes, you can. And will. Isn't that right, Richard?"

"Sure, Mother." Richard's voice was husky. "Don't let 'em get you d—down." He tried to speak jauntily, but his voice, stuttering on the final word, betrayed him to be as close to tears as Laura was. Laura had moved over to the window and stood clutching the ruffle of the curtain as though it were a rope and she about to drown. Suddenly she turned, her eyes burning. "We don't have to go back, do we, Mother? Ever?"

Mrs. Willard stared at her. "You want—you want——"

"What do you think?" Laura's voice was muffled; she gripped the curtain tighter and turned back to the window. "All those people downstairs——" Her voice broke in a sob. "I've had enough!" she cried.

Richard took a turn about the room. "Don't worry. So has Mother." He sat down on the bed and put his hand awkwardly

on Mrs. Willard's shoulder. "I'll take care of you, Mother," he promised her.

"Certainly you will," said Virginia briskly. "Come on now, let's pack up your mother's things before the dinner bell goes. Empty out that top drawer, Laura. Richard, see if there's anything stuck away back in the closet, rubbers or anything. Edith, if you want to wash your face, you'd better grab the bathroom before that Turner woman does. I know her kind. Does this *objet d'art* belong to you? No? You relieve me. There. Have we got everything?"

Laura and Richard, somewhat relaxed, were now working busily, and Mrs. Willard, though still more or less dazed, showed signs of returning to herself. "Virginia," she said as she came back from the bathroom, patting her face with a towel, "lend me a dollar or two to leave for Kathryn, will you? I'm stony, but I've got some money in the bank"—thank God, she thought, for the bus company's contribution—"and I'll be going back to work soon." But not for Miss Mothershead; never, never again for Miss Mothershead. And not for long. "Richard, you haven't a penny postcard about you, by any chance?" She must send Virginia's address and telephone number to Alec.

A traitorous thought struck her. Suddenly, and for the last time, she had no need of Alec. Her liberated spirit, singing upward like a tufted arrow, laid passionate claim to its integrity, its solitary freedom, and for a breathless moment knew them to be both sweeter and headier than love. There was no real hope, however, for this bright anarchy; the soul's arrow, failing of its mark, dropped with a small harmless clatter to the ground, and Mrs. Willard returned with joy to her earthbound loves. The thought of Alec spread through her consciousness like a swelling sunny tide. And the children ——

Why, the door was open. The walls were down.

She had a sudden and symbolic vision of Laura and Looney and Wippy the pup racing over a green lawn, giving off sparks of youth as they ran.

"Postcard?" Richard shook his head. "I can go out and get you one, though."

"Never mind. We'll get one at the station." Mrs. Willard snapped her hatbox shut and smiled at them. The dinner bell rang.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dorothy Langley is an American who spent her early years in the Middle West. She says that her favorite authors are Charles Dickens and Martha Finley, and adds that half an hour with the incredible Elsie Dinsmore never fails to cheer her up immensely. Although this is her first published novel, she has been writing short stories and poems for some years. She considers reading and writing more fun than anything else in the world, and this book was hardly printed before she was hard at work on another one.

THIS IS THE STORY of Mrs. Willard, who married in haste—and worse than that, married Charles Willard. Charles, to understate the situation, was not a pleasant man. He was pompous, he was selfish, he was immoderately overbearing. But, since young Mrs. Willard was much better at persisting than repenting, she spent the years that followed optimistically trying to make her marriage work.

Mrs. Willard had not only a nice face, but a nice mind. Her mind was originally constructed for registering things like toadstools in moss and the improbable ears of cocker spaniel pups. It was a durable mind in spite of its deceptive delicacy but it had not survived without signs of wear. After some years with Charles, it incurred library fines, lost track of telephone bills, and neglected to remind her to order starch. Mrs. Willard, however, was philosophic about it as a rule, for she understood that even excellent machinery may be expected to show wear after being driven for years by such a driver as Charles.

This, then, is the story of Mrs. Willard and what happened when she found herself abruptly and irrevocably in love with someone else.

Probably the most appealing thing about Mrs. Willard's story is Mrs. Willard herself, a person of impish humor and an incurably gentle sense of adventure. Charles, of course,

claims that she is irresponsible, lightminded, and lacking in respect. It doesn't take more than a page or two to discover that Charles is wrong. Even though the reader may not be in the habit of succumbing to paper heroines, we believe that he will almost certainly fall in love with Mrs. Willard as she faces her problems.

Although Charles Willard appears to disadvantage, let us hasten to inform the masculine reader that *WAIT FOR MRS. WILLARD* is not a general indictment of his sex. If the weaker sex seems immeasurably stronger after you have read this book, please remember—it was written by A Woman.

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